Al-Mīzān

An Exegesis of the Qurʾan

ʿAllāmah al-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī

Translated by: ʿAllāmah Sayyid Saʿīd Akhtār Rizvī

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In the Name of Allah,
the Beneficent, the Merciful.

All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds;
the Beneficent, the Merciful;
the Master of the Day of Judgment;
Thee only we serve, and to Thee alone we beseech
for help;
Guide us in the straight path;
The path of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed
favors,not of those against whom Thou art
wrathful, nor of those who are astray.

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O' Allah! send Your blessings to the head of
Your messengers and the last of
Your prophets,
Muḥammad and his pure and cleansed progeny.
Also send Your blessings to all Your
prophets and envoys.

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Arabic Transliteration Key

Arabic Letters	Transliteration	Arabic Letters	Transliteration
ا	ā	ع	ʿ
ب	b	غ	gh
ت	t	ف	f
ث	th	ق	q
ج	j	ك	k
ح	ḥ	ل	l
خ	kh	م	m
د	d	ن	n
ذ	dh	ه	h
ر	r	و	w/ū
ز	z	ى	y/ī
س	s	ء	ʾ
ش	sh	ة	-
ص	ṣ	ـَ	a
ض	ḍ	ـَ	i
ط	ṭ	ـُ	u
ظ	ẓ		

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Publisher's Note

In an effort to make the text more accessible to English-speaking readers, the editors have chosen to use English names for the prophets and figures (as listed below but not limited to) and to use Anglicized terms that now appear in English dictionaries.

Ādam	Adam	Mūsā	Moses
David	Dawūd	Sulaymān	Solomon
Hārūn	Aaron	Shuʿayb	Jethro
Ibrāhīm	Abraham	Yaʿqūb	Jacob
ʿĪsā	Jesus	ʾAyyūb	Job
Isḥāq	Isaac	Yūshaʿ	Joshua
Ismāʿīl	Ishmael	Yūsūf	Joseph
Jibrāʾīl	Gabriel	Zakariyyā	Zachariah
Maryam	Mary	ʿUzayr	Ezra

Arabic terms and names have been transliterated according to the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (*IJMES*).

For ease of reading, glyphs and traditional honorifics such as "peace be upon him" or (s.a.w.) which are commonly used as a gesture of respect after the name of the Prophet Muhammad, the Imams, or other sacred figures have been omitted from this text. No disrespect is intended, and may God's peace and blessings be upon them all!

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Foreword & Introduction

We are pleased to present to the readers, the third edition of the fifth English volume of *Tafsīr al-Mīzān*. The previous editions were published by World Organization for Islamic Services (WOFIS) in 1983 and 2010 respectively. The first thirteen English volumes were translated by the late ʿAllāmah Sayyid Saʿīd Akhtār Rizvī, may God elevate the status of his soul.

This third edition of the fifth volume incorporates the new format which has been implemented in the publications by our organization for ease of reading and reference. In this edition we have also made an attempt to edit the text further to the best of our ability in addition to correcting the previous typographical errors. Where necessary and useful, we have given additional references to the published volumes under footnotes.

English volume 5 corresponds to the first half of the third volume of the Arabic text and covers the exegesis of verses 1-41 of the third chapter of the Qurʾan, "The Family of Imrān"

The most significant discussion in this volume is on the decisive and ambiguous (or allegorical) verses and *taʾwīl* (interpretation) of the Book. This discourse is distributed in five comprehensive sections and summarized under ten subjects. These three issues have been discussed and analyzed in a logical and unprecedented manner by the author. In addition, the problem of interpretation by conjecture has also been discussed from both the Qur'anic and traditionalist points of view. This section of the volume is a must read for those who want to familiarize with the "structure" of the Qur'an.

Tawheed Institute Australia Ltd
Committee of Translation
December 2020

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About the Author

The late Islamic scholar, thinker, and philosopher, ʿAllāmah al-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī came from the celebrated Ṭabāṭabāʾī family of Tabriz. For the last three centuries, this family has produced generation after generation of renowned religious scholars in Azerbaijan (Iran). They are descendants of the second Imam, al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī (peace be on both of them). The clan is also referred to with the title, al-Qāḍī.

ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī was the son of al-Sayyid Muḥammad b. al-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī. ʿAllāmah was born in Tabriz on 29 Dhū al-Ḥijjah 1321/17 March 1904. His father died in 1330 (1912). The orphaned child grew up in Tabriz, and after completing his religious education there, around 1341 (1923), he went to Najaf (Iraq), the most important center of Shia religious learning.

In Najaf, he began his higher studies with such illustrious scholars as Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥusayn Nāʾīnī al-Gharawī (1277-1355/1860 or 1861-1936), the son of Shaykh al-Islām ʿAbdu al-Raḥīm, and Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Gharawī al-Iṣfahānī (1296-1361/1878-1942), the son of al-Ḥājj Muḥammad Ḥasan, Muʿīn al-Tujjār.

These two were among the most prominent scholars in the Shia world. They were among the most prominent scholars not only in the fields of Shia jurisprudence and principles of jurisprudence, but in all Islamic subjects. Their opinions and theories are still followed today. Each founded his own school of thought and trained thousands of Shia scholars and jurists; and all the *marājiʿ al-taqlīd*[1] of the Shia world, to this day, are their students. Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Gharawī al-Iṣfahānī was a philosopher, unsurpassed in his time; a man of literature; and a poet in Arabic and Persian; he was a genius whose achievements made others look up to him as their ideal. Shaykh Nāʾīnī, with his bold opinions and decrees in the political and social life of the Muslim *umma*, has carved for himself a niche in history.

ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī was much influenced by these two teachers, particularly by al-Iṣfahānī, in the development of his thought and

1 The highest authorities of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) whose rulings are followed by others.

knowledge. A third influence was that of al-Sayyid Abū al-Qāsim Jaʿfar Khwānsārī (1313-80/1895 or 1896-1961), the son of al-Sayyid Muḥammad al-Mūsāwī, known as "the mathematician." ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī was proud to have studied mathematics with him, and also wrote a book on higher mathematics, in which he applied some special theories of his teacher.

ʿAllāmah studied philosophy and metaphysics from al-Sayyid Ḥusayn al-Ḥusaynī Bādkūbahʾī; the latter was a student of al-Sayyid Riḍā, who studied with al-Sayyid Moses, a well-known teacher of philosophy and related subjects. In the fields of ethics and spirituality, ʿAllāmah received his training from his relatives, al-Sayyid ʿAlī al-Qāḍī (1285-1366/1869-1947), a well-known scholar who established a school of spiritual and ethical training which still flourishes today.

All these influences combined to create in ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī a well-balanced academic and spiritual personality. He was a well-respected authority on religious subjects of jurisprudence and its fundamentals; a philosopher of independent views and new theories; and an inspired model of ethical and spiritual perfection. He not only taught morality, but also lived it. Yet it is also correct to state that his scholarship was overshadowed by his fame and prestige as a philosopher and a spiritual man.

ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī returned to Tabriz in 1353/1934, where he was welcomed as a religious scholar. There he spent his time teaching higher philosophy to willing disciples—but it was a small place for his talents. In 1364/1945 he migrated to Qum, the most important center of religious education in Iran. In Qum, he remained engaged in imparting the knowledge of ethics, philosophy, and the exegesis of the Qurʾan to those students who had already attained a high level of erudition. There he remained until his death on Sunday, 18 Muḥarram 1402/15 November 1981. May God bestow His mercy on him. Amen.

Many religious leaders of the present generation were and are among his students and disciples, the most famous being the late Murtaḍā Muṭahharī (1338-99/1920-79).

ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī's fame rests on his academic works—the most important being his great exegesis of the Qurʾan, *al-Mīzān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān.* It is said to be the foundation stone of the academic prestige which ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī was accorded in the Muslim world.

Among his other works is *Uṣūl-i falsafah va ravish-i riʾalism* [Practical and Philosophical Principles of Realism]. This book is a comparative

study of Islamic philosophy and various modern anti-Islamic schools of thoughts, especially Marxism. His disciple, the late Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, annotated this work, thus making it easily accessible to the average man.

A third book, *Shiʿa dār Islām*, was first published in Persian; later it was published in English with the title, *Shiʾite Islam.* The ʿAllāmah wrote this book on the request of Professor Kenneth Morgan of Colgate University, to introduce Shiism to the West.

However, it is his *tafsīr, al-Mīzān* (published in 20 volumes in Arabic) which presents the true picture of the author's academic style and his way of thinking. In the preface to volume 1, the author outlines his plan, to explain the Qurʾan with the help of the Qurʾan itself. This he faithfully does, all the way through to the end of the *tafsīr*.

About the Translator

The late ʿAllāmah Sayyid Saʿīd Akhtār Rizvī was one of the most sincere preachers of Islam and an active scholar, both when he was in Tanzania in the Bilāl Muslim Mission (an Islamic organization active in Tanzania), and also when he returned to his own country of India. In the way of spreading Islam he has rendered enormous services and has been most active.

ʿAllāmah Sayyid Saʿīd Akhtār Rizvī had written scores of books and booklets in English, Urdu and Swahili, many of which have been published; and some other titles which have been published by WOFIS. Some of his books have been translated and published by in French, Italian, Japanese, Thai, Indonesian, Hausa and other languages.

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Chapter 3

Āl-Imrān (The Family of Imrān)

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Verses 1-6

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

الم ﴿١﴾ اللَّهُ لَا إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْحَيُّ الْقَيُّومُ ﴿٢﴾ نَزَّلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا
بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَأَنْزَلَ التَّوْرَاةَ وَالْإِنْجِيلَ ﴿٣﴾ مِنْ قَبْلُ هُدًى لِلنَّاسِ وَأَنْزَلَ الْفُرْقَانَ ۗ إِنَّ
الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ ۗ وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ ذُو انْتِقَامٍ ﴿٤﴾ إِنَّ اللَّهَ
لَا يَخْفَىٰ عَلَيْهِ شَيْءٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا فِي السَّمَاءِ ﴿٥﴾ هُوَ الَّذِي يُصَوِّرُكُمْ فِي
الْأَرْحَامِ كَيْفَ يَشَاءُ ۚ لَا إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٦﴾

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In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

(3:1) *Alif lām mīm*

(3:2) *Allah is He besides Whom there is no god, the Ever-living, the Self-subsisting by Whom all subsist*

(3:3) *He has revealed to thee the Book with truth, verifying that which is before it, and He revealed the Torah and the Injīl*

(3:4) *aforetime, a guidance for the people, and He sent down the al-Furqān. Surely they who disbelieve in the signs of Allah—they shall have a severe chastisement; and Allah is Mighty, the Lord of retribution.*

(3:5) *Allah, surely nothing is hidden from Him in the earth or in the heaven.*

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(3:6) *He it is Who shapes you in the wombs as He likes; there is no god but He, the Mighty, the Wise.*

Introduction

This chapter aims at exhorting the believers to remain united in

religion and to defend its cause with patience, forbearance and determination. It makes them aware of the dangers surrounding them: Their enemies, the Jews, the Christians and the polytheists, have made their preparations, and are determined to extinguish the Light of God with their hands and mouths.

In all likelihood, the chapter was revealed all together; its verses—200 in all—seem to be well connected and adhere to a laid down scheme. From the beginning to the end, the verses are related to one another and have consistent aims.

It looks as if this chapter was revealed when Islam had begun to spread in Arabia but had not yet established a firm foothold outside Medina. It mentions the battle of Uḥud, describes the planned imprecation with the Christians of Najrān; speaks about the Jews and exhorts the believers against the polytheists; and in all these discourses, there is a constant refrain telling them to remain patient and united. It supports the view that this chapter was revealed at a time when the Muslims were engaged in defense of religion with all their might and when all their resources were devoted to this one task. On one side, they had to remain alert against internal sabotage planned by the Jews and the Christians; the believers had not only to refute their arguments, but also to neutralize their craftily-planned subterfuges to demoralize the Muslims. On the other, they had to fight the polytheists; they lived in a state of war, and peace seemed a forlorn hope. The call of Islam was reaching far and wide; this had prompted the enemies of truth—the Jews, the Christians and the Arabian polytheists—to attack the Muslims, in order to annihilate them before it was too late. Beyond the boundary of Arabia, the Byzantines and the Persians had the same design.

God in this chapter reminds the believers of the realities of religion that would make them happy and remove from their hearts the rust of doubts and satanic suggestions; and will keep them on guard against the deceptions of the People of the Book. He makes it clear that He has not relinquished the management of His kingdom for a single moment; nor have His creatures made Him weary. He has chosen the religion for them, and has guided a group of His servants to it—according to His established system: the system of cause and effect. Believer and unbeliever both walk on this very path. One day it is the unbeliever that looks victorious, the other day the believer vanquishes the unbeliever. The world is the place

of tests and trials; the time is the time of action; and the result will be known tomorrow—not today.

Commentary

الم ﴿١﴾ اللَّهُ لَا إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْحَيُّ الْقَيُّومُ ﴿٢﴾

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(3:1-2) ***Alif lām mīm. Allah is He besides Whom there is no god, the Ever-living, the Self-subsisting by Whom all subsist.***

Its explanation has been given in "the verse of the Chair" (2:255). It might be inferred from it that God looks after the affairs of creation and management in the most comprehensive and perfect way. The whole universe, all the things and their actions and reactions, are managed by God. This management is not like that of the physical and natural causes that create an effect on an object but have no sense or understanding themselves. His management is that of "life" that entails knowledge and power. The Divine knowledge is comprehensive—nothing is hidden from Him; the Divine power controls everything—nothing can happen unless He intends it to happen and allows it to appear.

That is the reason why, after two more verses, it has been said: *Allah, surely nothing is hidden from Him in the earth or in the heaven* (3:5). *He it is Who shapes you in the wombs as He likes …* (3:6).

These six verses are a sort of prologue of this chapter, giving in a nutshell what the chapter contains in detail. Of these verses, this one is a sort of introducing speech, describing a basic truth that leads to the intended result. And the fifth and sixth verses, mentioned above, give the reason of the preceding verses. Therefore, the main theme of the prologue is contained in the two verses of the middle: *He has revealed to you the Book with truth, verifying that which is before … and Allah is Mighty, the Lord of retribution.*

According to these verses, the believers must remember that God, in Whom they believe, is One in His Godhead, maintains the creation and manages its affairs—a living management; He cannot be overpowered in His kingdom, nor there happens anything therein except what He intends and allows to happen: If they believe in it, they shall know that it is He Who has revealed the Book that guides to the truth; the Separator that distinguishes the right from the wrong. They shall appreciate that in this matter also, He has decreed the same system of

cause and effect, and has therefore given the man freedom of choice; he who believes shall have his reward; he who disbelieves, shall get its chastisement, because God is Mighty, the Lord of retribution. It is because He is God, besides Whom there is no god to decide in these affairs; nothing of His servants' affairs is hidden from Him; their belief and disbelief is not independent of His will and decree.

نَزَّلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَأَنْزَلَ التَّوْرَاةَ وَالْإِنْجِيلَ ﴿٣﴾ مِنْ قَبْلُ هُدًى لِلنَّاسِ وَأَنْزَلَ الْفُرْقَانَ ۗ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ ۗ وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ ذُو انْتِقَامٍ ﴿٤﴾

(3:3-4) ***He has revealed to thee the Book with truth*** **(bi al-ḥaqq),** ***verifying that which is before it, and He revealed the Torah and the Injīl aforetime, a guidance for the people, and He sent down the al-Furqān. Surely they who disbelieve in the signs of Allah—they shall have a severe chastisement; and Allah is Mighty, the Lord of retribution.***

The word translated as "revealed" is a verbal form of *al-tanzīl.* It was explained in the second volume that *al-tanzīl* (to send down) implies gradualness, while *al-inzāl* shows sending down all at once.

It may be argued that the following verses go against this implied gradualness: … *Why has not the Qur'an been revealed to him all at once?* (25:32); … *Is thy Lord able to send down to us food from heaven?* (5:112); … *Why has not a sign been sent down to him from his Lord? Say: Surely Allah is able to send down a sign* … (6:37). In all the four instances, verbs derived from *al-tanzīl* have been used, but they do not mean gradual descent.

An exegete has tried to overcome this difficulty by suggesting that the words, "sent down (that is, revealed) to you the Book," means, sent it down sending after sending.

Reply: Gradualness in revelation (sending down) does not necessarily mean considerable gap between revelation of one part and the other. There are composite things whose existence is the same as that of their parts, like rain. Sometimes the speaker looks at the rain as a whole, and treats it as one undivided thing—it is quite in order, in this case, to describe it with the verb *al-inzāl* (sending down all at once), as God says using this same verb: *He sends down water from the heavens* (13:17). At other times, He looks at its parts, that is, drops of water,

descending one after the other—it does not matter whether the gap between two drops is considerable or minimal—and then it may be described with the verb *al-tanzīl* (sending down gradually), as God has done in another verse: *And He it is Who sends down the rain …* (42:28).

It appears from above that the verses, put forth against our explanation that *al-tanzīl is* for sending down gradually, are not against it at all. For example, the verse, *… why has not the Qur'an been revealed to him all at once* means: Why has not the Qur'an been revealed to him verse after verse at one stretch without considerable gaps between their revelation? Other verses may be correctly understood in this light. So far as the said exegete's proposed meaning is concerned, it, first of all, necessitates inventing a meaning according to one's own liking, and it is not permissible in any language. And even then the suggested meaning does not remove the objection in any way.

God frequently uses the words, *al-tanzīl* and *al-inzāl* when describing the revelation of the Book to the Prophet. "Coming down" requires a higher level from which a thing departs and a lower level where it reaches and settles. God has used for His Person the attribute of highness, as He says, for example: *… surely He is High, Wise* (42:51). And He has said about His Book that it is from Him: *And when there came to them a Book from Allah verifying that which they have …* (2:89). Therefore, it is very appropriate to use the word, "coming down," when describing the revelation settling down into the heart of the Messenger of God.

al-Ḥaqq and *al-ṣidq* both are translated as "truth." But *al-ḥaqq* is the information inasmuch as there is an established fact in front of it; and *al-ṣidq is* the information in as much as it conforms with such a fact. The emphasis in the former is on the established fact, while in the latter it is on conformity.

According to this explanation, the word *al-ḥaqq* is used for God and for other existing realities, because they are true and actual facts about which the information is given. Anyhow, the word "truth," as used in this verse, means an established fact that cannot be invalidated.

The preposition *bi* (with) in *bi al-ḥaqq* (with truth) is for togetherness. The verse, therefore, means: He has revealed to you the Book, a revelation accompanied by truth. Naturally, this accompanying would mean that untruth and falsehood could never mix with it; it is always

safe from falling a prey to falsity and lie. The verse, thus, hints at this fact obliquely.

Some other exegetes have explained the preposition, "with," in some other ways; but none of them is free from defects.

al-Taṣdīq is derived from *al-ṣidq* (truth) and means to verify, to acknowledge the truth of, to believe one to be truthful in the given information. "That which is before it," refers to the Torah and Injīl. God says: *Surely We sent down the Torah in which was guidance … and We gave [Jesus] the Injīl in which was guidance … And We have revealed to you the Book with the truth, verifying what is before it of the book and a guardian over it …* (5:44-48). These verses show that the Old and the New Testaments that are today in the hands of the Jews and the Christians contain between them some of the revelations sent to Moses and Jesus, although they are not free from omissions and alterations. The Torah and the Injīl found in the days of the Messenger of God were the same Pentateuch and the same four Gospels that are known to us today; and the Qur'an verifies the same scriptures that were in existence then and have continued to our days. But this verification is partial, not total. There are many Qur'anic verses that speak of omission and alteration in these two scriptures. God says: … *We cursed [the Jews] and made their hearts hard; they alter the words from their places, and have forgotten a part of what they were admonished with; … And of those who say, Verily, we are Nazarenes* [*Naṣārā,* Christians], *We did take their covenant, but they forgot a portion of what they were admonished with …* (5:13-14).

… ***and He revealed the Torah and the Injīl, aforetime, a guidance for the people:*** Torah is a Hebrew word for "law." Injīl is the Arabic rendering of a Greek word, meaning 'good news'[1]. Some people say that it is derived from a Persian word.[2] We shall discuss in detail about these two books under the verse: *Surely We sent down the Torah in which was guidance and light …* (5:44).

The Qur'an insists on naming the book of Jesus as Injīl (Gospel, in singular) and on saying that it was sent down from God. It is in spite

1 Greek word, evangelion, means "good news." In old English it was translated to 'gospell' (good tidings, good news) which later became gospel, a name now used in English for the Injīl. (Trans.)

2 There is no evidence to support this claim (Trans.).

of the fact that there are several Gospels, and the four attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, existed since before the revelation of the Qur'an, and were well-known at that time. These two factors—the use of singular, Gospel, and the declaration that it was sent down from God—clearly show the Qur'anic belief that there was a Gospel, revealed to Jesus that was later altered and deleted.

Anyhow, the references to these two books so early in the beginning is an allusion to the Jews and the Christians, hinting that the affairs of these two groups (including the story of Jesus) are to be described in this chapter.

*… **and He sent down the al-Furqān:** al-Furqān* as explained in *al-Ṣiḥiḥ,* is what distinguishes truth from falsehood. The word, literally means "that which distinguishes one thing from another." God says: *… on the day of distinction, the day on which the two parties met …* (8:41); *… He will grant you a distinction …* (8:29). The distinction and discrimination, that God approves in matter of guidance, is the distinction between truth and falsehood in belief and knowledge, and between what constitutes the duty of a servant of God and what does not do so. Thus, *al-Furqān* (distinction) may correctly be used for all basic principles and adjunct matters revealed by God to His prophets—whether it is in form of a book or not. God says: *And certainly We gave to Moses and Aaron the al-Furqān …* (21:48); *And when We gave Moses the Book and the distinction* (al-Furqān)… (2:53); *Blessed is He Who sent down the al-Furqān upon His servant that he may be a warner to the nations* (25:1).

God has also described the same meaning with the word, *al-mīzān* (weighing scale, balance) in the verse: *Certainly We sent Our apostles with clear arguments, and sent down with them the Book and the balance that men may conduct themselves with equity* (57:25). This verse has the same import as the verse: *Mankind was but one people; so Allah sent the prophets as bearers of good news and as warners, and He sent down with them the Book with truth, so that it might judge between the people in that in which they had differed* (2:213). The balance, like the distinction, is the religion that decides between the people with equity, and contains the true knowledge and explains the duties of the servants towards their Lord.

Others have interpreted the word 'distinction' in various ways: It

has been said that the word means the Qur'an; the proof that separates right from wrong; the convincing argument of the Prophet against those who talked with him about Jesus; the (Divine) help; or the wisdom. But what we have said gives the basic meaning and implication of the word.

Surely they who disbelieve in the signs of Allah—they shall have a severe chastisement; and Allah is Mighty, the Lord of retribution: *al-Intiqām* (retribution) is said to mean punishing the wrong-doer for his wrong. It is not done necessarily to satisfy the feeling of the wronged party. Of course, this happens in man's retribution; when one does a wrong to us, it causes a damage or shortcoming on our side, and we make that up by severe retribution that assuages our heart feelings. But God is too great to get any profit or loss from any action of His servants. Yet, He has given us a promise—and His promise is true—that He shall surely judge between His servants with truth, and will give them their dues—if good, then good, and if evil, then evil. He has said: *And Allah judges with the truth* (40:20); … *that He may reward those who do evil according to what they do, and [that] He may reward those who do good with goodness* (53:31). He is Mighty in the most comprehensive meaning of the might, nobody and nothing can do any harm to Him. (It has been said that the basic meaning of the "might" is invincibility)

The verse says that surely those who disbelieve in the signs of God—they shall have a severe chastisement. The chastisement is not restricted to the Day of Resurrection or to the next world. The verse, therefore, may refer to chastisement in both worlds—this life as well as the life hereafter. This is a Qur'anic dictum to which the scholars have paid little attention. This neglect betrays a basic misunderstanding of ours: We never think that a thing is a chastisement unless it inflicts pain upon our body or causes decrease or deterioration in our material belongings. Loss of property, death of kith and kin and weakness or sickness of body are the examples of chastisement in our eyes. But the Qur'an gives us a totally different concept of chastisement.

Chastisement as Explained by the Qur'an

In the eyes of the Qur'an, a man who forgets his Lord lives a straitened life—even though in our eyes he may be living most luxuriously.

God says: *And whoever turns away from My remembrance, his shall surely be a straitened life …* (20:124); and it counts even the wealth and the children as chastisements, even though we count them as pleasant blessings: *And let not their properties and their children excite your admiration; Allah only wishes to chastise them with these in this world and [that] their souls may depart while they are unbelievers* (9:85).

It was described, in short, under the verse 2:35 (*And We said: O Adam! dwell you and your wife in the garden …*) that:

First: Man's joy and sorrow, pleasure and displeasure, attraction and repulsion, enjoyment and suffering, all depend on his views as to what constitutes his good fortune, and what his misfortune.

Second: Comfort and discomfort and so on, vary according to the subjects to which they are related. The spirit has its own joy and sorrow; and the body its own comfort and discomfort. Likewise, animal's sense of ease or pain is not on the same level as that of man.

A man having material outlook does not acquire the Divine attributes, and his characteristics do not reflect the light of sublime virtues. Such a man counts the material felicity as the true felicity; in his eyes, spiritual bliss is not a bliss at all. He remains inordinately engrossed in wealth, children, prestige and worldly power and domination. It is reasonable to suppose that once he gets these things he would be happy and his bliss would be complete. But reality belies expectation. What he wanted was pure blessing free from every shade of distress. What he got was a pleasure surrounded by a thousand agonies. When he had not got what he longed for, he was distressed because of deprivation; when he got it he was grieved because it was very different from what he expected. Each acquirement brought with it a lot of stings; the causes he relied upon failed to bring about the desired effects. And as he had not established any connection with the 'real cause' beyond the apparent causes, he could not find solace in any misery, nor could he get peace of mind in any adversity. Thus, even after getting what he strived for, he remained in despair and desolation.

Such dissatisfaction of man with what he gets spurs him to even farther goals, in the hope of a really blessed future. And the story is repeated again and again. He remains worried before getting his objective; he becomes distressed after getting it.

The Qur'an, on the other hand, teaches us that man is made of two

things: a spirit that is eternal, and a body that is subject to changes and deterioration. He remains like this, until he returns to his Lord; then he gets eternity without any change or deterioration. Whatever constitutes the bliss of the spirit, (for example, knowledge) is his real bliss; and whatever is the bliss of the spirit and the body together, like property and children, is also his bliss and felicity—and what a good thing it is!—provided it does not divert his attention from God and does not tie him down to materialistic ideas. In the same way, a thing which causes discomfort, or even destruction, to the body, but brings about spiritual blessings, is his blessing (like being killed in the way of God, destruction of property in the cause of religion and so on). It is like tolerating, for a moment, the bitter taste of a medicine to secure permanent health.

On the contrary, what brings about a comfort to the body but harms the spirit, is the real suffering of man; it is his chastisement and evil reward. The Qur'an calls the comfort of the body only as a brief enjoyment: *Let it not deceive you that those who disbelieve go to and fro in the cities [fearlessly]. A brief enjoyment! then their abode is hell, and evil is the resting place* (3:196-197).

Also that which harms the body and spirit both, is called by the Qur'an a chastisement. The unbelievers too call it a chastisement, but their reasoning is different from that of the Qur'an. The Qur'an calls it a chastisement because it harms the spirit; they call it a chastisement, because it harms the body. Look, for example, at various retributions sent down to previous nations. God says: *Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with ʿĀd, the [people of] Iram, possessors of many-columned buildings, the like of which were not created in the cities; and [with] Thamūd, who hewed out the rocks in the valley; and [with] Pharaoh, the lord of the stakes, who transgressed in the cities; so they made great mischief therein? Therefore, your Lord let fall upon them the whip of chastisement. Most surely your Lord is on watch* (89:6-14).

The pleasure and displeasure, for sentient things, depend on feeling and perception. We do not count a pleasant thing used by us, as a blessing, if we did not feel it. Likewise, a painful experience is not painful to us if we do not feel its affect.

It shows that what the Qur'an teaches us about the happiness and unhappiness is quite different from material comfort and discomfort.

Man, surrounded by material things, needs some especial training to perceive the real happiness as happiness, and the real unhappiness as unhappiness. It is for the purpose of this training, that the Qur'an asks its people not to attach their hearts to other than God; to realize that their Lord is the Real Owner Who owns everything and everything depends on Him; nothing should be obtained but for His sake.

A man having this outlook will always find in this world unlimited sources of happiness: either the bliss of spirit and body together, or that of the spirit only. Other things, he will count as misfortune and as sources of unhappiness.

But a man who is entangled in worldly pleasure and material comfort, thinks, at least in the beginning, that what he has acquired of the trinkets of this world is a blessing and good fortune for him, that it is the root of his happiness. But soon he realizes that he is wandering aimlessly in a desert full of dangerous beasts, poisonous snakes and tormenting scorpions. What he thought to be his good fortune turns into greatest misfortune. God says: *Therefore, leave them to go on with [false] discourses and sport until they come face to face with that day of theirs which they are promised* (70:42); *Certainly you were heedless of it; but now We have removed from you your veil, so your sight today is sharp* (50:22); *Therefore turn aside from him who turns his back upon Our reminder and does not desire anything but this world's life. That is their goal of knowledge; surely your Lord knows best him who goes astray from His path and He knows best him who follows the right direction.* (53:29-30). Whatever pleasure they get is contaminated with a lot of worry and distress.

This leads us to believe that the perception and thinking found in the people of God and the Qur'an, are quite different from those of other people, although both groups are human beings. And between the two extremes there are countless ranks of those believers who have not yet perfected their divine character.

This, in short, is the chastisement, as explained by the Qur'an. Of course, the Qur'an uses the word torment or chastisement for bodily discomfort and pain also. But it counts it as the discomfort of body, unrelated to the real, that is, spiritual chastisement. God quotes Job as saying: *The Satan has affected me with toil and torment* (ʿadhāb) (38:41); also He says: *And when We delivered you from Pharaoh's people who*

subjected you to severe punishment (sūʾ al-ʿadhāb), *killing your sons and sparing your women, and in this there was a great trial from your Lord* (7:141). Note how God calls what they were subjected to as a trial and test from God, but a torment in itself—not from God.

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَخْفَىٰ عَلَيْهِ شَيْءٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا فِي السَّمَاءِ ﴿٥﴾

(3:5) ***Allah, surely nothing is hidden from Him in the earth or in the heaven.***

In the preceding verse, God mentioned, as the reason of His punishing the disbelievers, the fact that He "is Mighty, the Lord of retribution." But there was a possibility of misunderstanding there—someone might think that the Mighty Lord of retribution might remain unaware of one's disbelief and thus one might escape His retribution. Hence, this verse that shows that He is such a Mighty One that nothing is hidden from Him.

Possibly, what is "in the earth" and "in the heaven" may refer to the actions done by the body's organs, and the ideas settled in the mind, respectively, as we had hinted in commentary of the verse: … *and whether you manifest what is in your souls or hide it, Allah will call you to account for it* (2:284).

هُوَ الَّذِي يُصَوِّرُكُمْ فِي الْأَرْحَامِ كَيْفَ يَشَاءُ ۚ لَا إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٦﴾

(3:6) ***He it is Who shapes you in the wombs as He likes; there is no god but He, the Mighty, the Wise.***

al-Taṣwīr is to give form (*ṣūrah*) to a thing. "Form" means two-dimensional pictures as well as three-dimensional objects—or, as they say in Arabic, that which does not have a shadow, and that which has; "womb" is uterus, the organ in female mammal in which child or young is conceived and nourished till birth.

This verse takes the discourse to a level higher than the preceding two. First it was said that God would chastise those who disbelieve in His signs, because He is Mighty, Lord of retribution Who knows what is hidden and what is manifest; He is not overpowered in His affairs; He it is Who dominates everything. Now this verse says that the reality is even greater than that. The one who rejects God's signs and disobeys His commandments has no power of his own to do any work—even when He disbelieves in Divine signs and thinks that he is independent

of God in his actions, he does so by the power given to him by none other than God. It is not that he overpowers the decree of God, nor that he disturbs the fine system which God has established for His creatures; nor does his will overcome the will of God. The fact is that God Himself has given him the latitude to do as he wishes—whether he walks on the straight path of belief and obedience or wanders away in the wilderness of disbelief and disobedience. God has given this freedom of choice to man so that the test may be meaningful; so that whosoever wishes so, may believe, and whosoever wishes so, may disbelieve. And they do not wish except that God wishes, the Lord of the universe.

Everything—including the belief and disbelief—is from a Divine decree: God has created everything and programmed it in such a way that it smoothly proceeds towards its intended goal and acquires its objective. And this Divine decree is all-encompassing and predominates all wills and power. And God is Predominant in His affairs, Overpowering in His will, Guardian over His creatures. Man, in his ignorance, thinks that he does what he does, by his own will and choice, and that when he goes against the commandments of God, he disturbs the system which God has established. But the reality is otherwise. Man is irremovably imprisoned in the above-mentioned Divine system; and even this transgression and rebellion is governed by that very system—the system of free will and choice. To this hints the sentence, *He it is Who shapes you in the wombs as He likes*. Your existence is so programmed from the earliest days of your foetal life that you irresistibly proceed on the road God has opened for you—opened it by giving you freedom of will, not by compelling you to follow a certain path.

The verse only mentions the decree so far as man is concerned; it does not involve itself with other things; thus it keeps itself confined to the topic at hand. Also, it is an oblique hint against the Christians concerning their belief about Jesus Christ; even the Christians do no deny Christ's development inside the womb; and that he did not make himself.

God changed the pronoun from singular (revealed to "thee") to plural (shape "you") in this verse to show that even the belief of the believers, just like the disbelief of the disbelievers, is not independent of that decree. By appreciating this truth, the believers will be happy

with the mercy and bounties that God has bestowed on them; and will not be depressed on hearing about the retribution that shall be meted out to disbelievers.

…there is no god but He, the Mighty, the Wise: The verse reverts to the initial topic, that is, monotheism. It, in a way, condenses the arguments for the sake of emphasis. The topics described in the preceding verses—guiding the creatures after creating them, revealing the book and establishing a criterion for discrimination between right and wrong, confirming the arrangement by punishing the disbelievers—all need a god to manage them; and as there is no god except God, then it is He Who guides the people, reveals the Book and sends down the distinction, and chastises those who disbelieve in His signs; and whatever He does, He does it by His Might and His wisdom.

Examining Narrations

(1) It is reported in *Majmaᶜ al-bayān,* from al-Kalbī, Muḥammad Ibn Isḥāq and al-Rabīᶜ b. Anas that eighty odd verses from the beginning of the chapter were revealed about the delegation of Najrān. And they were sixty riders; they came to the Messenger of God; and among them were fourteen persons from their nobles; and three among those fourteen had the final authority in their hands: (1) al-ᶜĀqib, the leader of his people and their counsellor, they did nothing without his advice, and his name was ᶜAbdu al-Masīḥ; (2) al-Sayyid, their patron and leader of their caravan, and his name was al-Ayham; and (3) Abū Ḥārithah bin ᶜAlqamah, their bishop, prelate, religious leader, and head of their schools; he had very high prestige in their eyes and had studied their books; the Byzantine emperors accorded him great respect, and had built for him many churches; all this was because of his learning and energetic efforts.

So they came to the Messenger of God in Medina, and entered his mosque when he had finished the afternoon prayer. They had put on fine Yemenite clothes: cloaks and mantles; (they were) handsome like the people of Balḥārith b. Kaᶜb. Some of the companions of the Messenger of God; who had seen them, have said: "We never saw a delegation like them." Then the time

of their prayer came, and they started ringing their bell and stood up and prayed in the Mosque of the Messenger of God. The companions said: "O Messenger of God. This (is happening) in your mosque?" The Messenger of God said: "Do not disturb them." So they prayed facing towards the east. Then al-Sayyid and al-ʿĀqib had a talk with the Messenger of God. The Messenger of God then invited them to become Muslim. They replied: "We had been Muslims (that is, believers) before you."
He said: "You both tell wrong. What prevents you from accepting Islam is your claim that God has a son, and your worship of the cross and your eating the pig."
They said: "If he (that is, Jesus Christ) was not son of God, then who was his father?"
Then they all started arguing about Jesus. Thereupon, the Prophet told them: "Do you not know that there is no son but that he resembles his father?"
They said: "Yes."
He said: "Do you not know that our Lord is Ever-living, He shall not die? And that Jesus will die?"
They said: "Yes."
He said: "Do you not know that our Lord is the Guardian of everything; He protects it and gives it sustenance?"
They said: "Yes."
He said: "Does Jesus possess any such power?"
They said: "No."
He said: "Do you not know that nothing is hidden from Him in the earth or in the heaven?"
They said: "Yes."
He said: "Then does Jesus know anything of it except that which he was taught?"
They said: "No."
He said: "So our Lord shaped Jesus in the womb as He liked; and our Lord neither eats, drinks nor does He discharge excrement?"
They said: "Yes."
He said: "Do you not know about Jesus that his mother kept him (in womb) as a woman does, and gave birth to him as a

woman does; then he was fed as a child is fed; then he used to eat, drink and discharge excrement?"
They said: "Yes."
He said: "Then how can it be as you think?"
Thereupon, they remained silent. Then God revealed about them eighty odd verses from the beginning of the Chapter of "The Family of ʿImrān."

Author's comment: The same thing has been narrated by al-Suyūṭī in *al-Durr al-manthūr* from Abū Isḥāq, Ibn Jarīr and Ibn al-Mundhir from Muḥammad b. Jaʿfar b. al-Zubayr; and also from Ibn Isḥāq from Muḥammad b. Sahl b. Abī Amāmah.

The story shall be quoted later; as regards their claim that (only) the first eighty odd verses were revealed in this connection, it appears that it was their personal opinion; otherwise, as earlier explained, the context and style obviously show that the whole chapter was revealed all together.

(2) It is narrated from the Prophet: The unfortunate is he who became unfortunate in the womb of his mother; and the fortunate is he who became fortunate in the womb of his mother.

(3) It is narrated in *al-Kāfī* from al-Bāqir that he said: "When God wants to create a semen—and it is among that from which covenant was taken from the loin of Adam—(or as He may decide later); and (wants) to put it in the womb, He excites the man for sexual intercourse, and reveals to the womb, 'Open thy door so that My creature and My firm decree may enter into thee.' So it opens its door. The sperm reaches the womb, and moves therein for forty days: then it becomes a clot for forty days; then becomes a lump of flesh for forty days, then flow in it interlaced veins. Then God sends two creator angels who make in the wombs what God wishes; they enter into the belly of the woman, from the woman's mouth; so they reach the womb, and in it is the ancient spirit, that was transferred into loins of men and wombs of women. Then they blow in it the spirit of life and eternity, and they create openings for his hearing and sight, and (make) his limbs and all that is in the stomach, by permission of God. Then God reveals to the two angels: 'Write on him My decree and My destiny and firm order; and write

down that I may change that which you write.' They say: 'O Lord! what are we to write?' Thereupon God reveals to them to raise their heads towards the head of the mother. They raise their heads, and lo! there is a tablet striking the mother's forehead. They look into it and find in it his features, his embellishment, his death time, his covenant—whether he shall be a fortunate or an unfortunate one, and all his affairs. Thereupon, one of them dictates to the other; thus they write down all that is in the tablet, and make it conditional on the final decision (of God). Then they seal the writing and put it between his eyes. Then they make him stand upright in the womb of his mother." (The Imam) said: "Sometimes he disobeys and turns upside down, and it does not happen except in case of an arrogant and rebellious one. And when time comes for the foetus to come out, developed or undeveloped, God reveals to the womb: 'Open thy door so that My creature may go out to My earth, and My order may be enforced about him, because now time has come for him to go out.' " (The Imam) said: "Then the womb opens the door of the child; so he turns upside down, his feet go over his head, his head reaches the lower part of the (mother's) stomach. (It is done) so that delivery may be easier for the woman and the child. Then God sends to him an angel, named 'the Admonisher,' who sternly tells him to go out; the child becomes frightened; when it delays some more, the angel tells him once again to get out; the child becomes (even more) frightened and falls on the earth crying, terrified because of that rebuke."

Author's comment: The words of the Imam, "When God wants to create a semen," means, when God wants to create a well-made perfect human being from a semen. The parenthetic sentence, "it is among that from which covenant was taken" alludes to the fact that man before coming into this world existed in a world, called in the traditions as "the world of motes" and "the world of covenant"; and this life follows the pattern of that one. Whatever soul made covenant in that world must surely be born in this world well-made and perfect. The other parenthetic sentence, "or as He may decide later," refers to that foetus that is not from among those who had covenanted in that

world; such foetus does not develop to its perfection and is miscarried. The phrase, "and to put it in the womb" is in conjunction with the preceding words, "when God wants to create." "They enter into the belly of the woman, from the woman's mouth": There is a possibility that the phrase, "from the woman's mouth," is an explanatory note added by the narrator of the tradition; this possibility is supported by the fact that the word "woman's" has been repeated instead of saying "from her mouth." But if it is the word of the Imam then it shows that their entrance is not as a body enters into another body. The way into the womb is from vagina; the only other way may be through blood-vessels including that through which menstrual blood reaches uterus. Surely, this passage is not easier than the vagina. And it proves that their entering through mouth has some reason other than the ease of passage. "And in it is the ancient spirit that was transferred into loins of men and wombs of women": Probably it is the spirit of vegetation that is the source of nourishment and growth. "Then they blow in it the spirit of life and eternity": Apparently, the pronoun, "it," refers to the ancient spirit; accordingly, the spirit of life and eternity is blown into the spirit of vegetation. If the pronoun stands for the "lump of flesh," then it would mean that the spirit of life and eternity is blown into the lump of flesh that has already got vegetative life. In any case, it shows that flowing of human spirit into foetus is a forward step of vegetative life; and that at that stage it gets a new vigor and vitality.

The above explanation also throws light on transference of the ancient spirit into loins of men and wombs of women. The spirit exists with the body, that is, the semen and the menstrual blood that feeds the foetus; and these two things are parts of the bodies of the parents. Thus, the foetus has its share from the lives of its parents, and they in their turn are parts of the lives of their parents, and so on. Whatever happens to a man is somewhat a reflection of the lives of his father and mother. In a miniature form he represents all his ancestors—he is in a way the "contents" of the book that existed before him.[1]

This also may explain the sentence, "God reveals to (the angels)

1 Probably, this phenomenon may be illustrated by DNA, the hereditary material of life, found in chromosomes, in viruses, and in bacteria. This microscopic compound is the instrument through which hereditary characteristics are transmitted to the next generation. (Trans.)

to raise their heads towards the head of the mother." So far as the decrees concerning the child are concerned, their link with his father was disconnected when the semen separated from him; now his only relation is with the mother. It is referred to in these words: "and lo! there is a tablet striking the mother's forehead." The forehead is centre of perceptive powers and a main feature of one's appearance. The angels on studying it find in it the child's features, appearance and life as well as his covenant, whether he will be a fortune or an unfortunate person; in short, they see in it all his affairs; one of the angels dictates it all to the other—their mutual relationship is like that of an active agent and a passive one. They write all that is in the tablet. "And make it conditional on the final decision of God": The feature does not contain all the causes and factors affecting a man's life. External events and circumstances also play important part in it. Hence the need of this conditional phrase.[1]

This tradition attributes to God all the details of conception and birth of a child: God excites the man; reveals to the womb, sends two angels to shape the child, and another angel to get him out of the womb, and so on. The tradition does not deny the existence of natural causes for these events. According to Islam, there are two sets of perfect causes for every happening—one metaphysical and the other physical. They are not against one another; nor do they together constitute a joint perfect cause. Both are perfect causes—each on its own level.

God sends the prophets and Imams to guide the people to their spiritual bliss and happiness; and to lead them to their spiritual perfection, The path laid down for it is spiritual. It is those divine leaders' duty to talk to their people in a way that they may proceed and progress on this path. For this purpose, it is essential that the people be reminded of their Lord at every step. That is why the religious guides attribute man's all affairs to God, mention the agency of angels and explain that good fortune and felicity depend on their help; and that misfortunes and trouble are caused by the satans and their deception; then they remind that ultimately everything is attributed to God, so far as it is proper for His sanctity and sublimity. Thus, the people come to

1 Probably, the author wants to say that the angels write down his affairs as much as his hereditary characteristics reveal; but leave out the changes that may be affected in it by factors of environment. (Trans.)

understand guidance and misguidance, profit and harm and, in short, every affair of the life hereafter.

But those leaders did not deny the natural causes, nor did they put it in second place. Physical and natural causes are one of the two pillars of human life; they are the foundations upon which is based the life of this world. It is essential for man to know all about these causes too as it is for him to know all about metaphysical and spiritual causes. Only then he will know his own "self"; and that will lead him to know his Lord.

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Verses 7-9

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ وَأُخَرُ
مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ ۖ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَابَهَ مِنْهُ ابْتِغَاءَ الْفِتْنَةِ
وَابْتِغَاءَ تَأْوِيلِهِ ۗ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ ۗ وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ آمَنَّا بِهِ
كُلٌّ مِنْ عِنْدِ رَبِّنَا ۗ وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّا أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ ﴿٧﴾ رَبَّنَا لَا تُزِغْ قُلُوبَنَا بَعْدَ إِذْ
هَدَيْتَنَا وَهَبْ لَنَا مِنْ لَدُنْكَ رَحْمَةً ۚ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْوَهَّابُ ﴿٨﴾ رَبَّنَا إِنَّكَ جَامِعُ النَّاسِ
لِيَوْمٍ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُخْلِفُ الْمِيعَادَ ﴿٩﴾

(3:7) *He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book, of it there are some verses decisive, they are the basis of the Book, and others are ambiguous; then as for those in whose hearts there is perversity, they follow the part of it which is ambiguous, seeking to mislead, and seeking to give it [their own] interpretation, but none knows its interpretation except Allah; and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: We believe in it, it is all from our Lord; and none do mind except those having understanding.*

(3:8) *Our Lord! Make not our hearts to deviate after Thou hast guided us [aright]; and grant us from Thee mercy; surely Thou art the most liberal Giver.*

(3:9) *Our Lord! Surely Thou art the Gatherer of men on a day about which there is no doubt; surely Allah fails not [His] promise.*

Commentary

(3:7) ***He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book, of it there are some verses decisive, they are the basis of the Book, and others are ambiguous; then as for those in whose hearts there is perversity, they follow the part of it which is ambiguous, seeking to mislead, and seeking to give it [their own] interpretation, but none knows its interpretation except Allah; and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: We believe in it, it is all from our Lord; and none do mind except those***

having understanding He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book

In this verse, the verbal form *al-inzāl* (to send down all together) has been used, instead of *al-tanzīl* (to send down gradually) that was used in the verse 3. It is because this verse looks at the whole Book in its entirety, and describes some especial characteristics of the complete Book. It discloses that the Book on the whole contains some decisive verses and some ambiguous ones, the import of which may be known by returning them to the decisive ones. As the Book is here looked at as one entity, the use of the verbal form *al-inzāl was* more appropriate.

…of it there are some verses decisive* (muḥkamāt)*, they are the basis of the Book, and others are ambiguous* (mutashābihāt)*: *al-Muḥkamāt* (translated here as decisive) is derived from the root word *ḥ-k-m*; the root implies that a thing is so protected that nothing can pervert or break it or interfere with it. Some infinitive verbs made from it are *al-iḥkām* (to make precise, to confirm, to strengthen), *al-taḥkīm* (to arbitrate) and *al-ḥukm* (to judge); some other words are *al-ḥikmah* (perfect knowledge, wisdom) and *al-ḥakamah* (bit of a horse's bridle). All these meanings have the elements of protection and preciseness in them. Some people say that the root word gives the meaning of protection and reformation.

al-Iḥkām of the verses means making them so precise that no ambiguity remains therein, contrary to *al-mutashābihāt* (ambiguous) ones.

Before going further, it should be mentioned here that in various places, God has described all the verses as being *al-muḥkamāt;* and again the whole Book has been called *al-mutashābih*. But the words have been used in those verses for meanings other than "decisive" and "ambiguous" respectively. God says: *[This is] a Book, whose verses were confirmed* (uḥkimat)*; then they were divided, from one Wise All-aware* (11:1). This verse uses the verbal form of *al-iḥkām* (to confirm, to make precise); but it goes on to mention "division"; this association shows that the verb *al-iḥkām* (to confirm) refers to that state when the Book, before its revelation, was an indivisible one; it points to that "confirmation" and stability which was found in it before it was subjected to particularization for the purpose of revelation. This confirmation is an attribute of the whole Book; and obviously it is something different from *al-iḥkām* (decisiveness), mentioned in the verse under discussion, which is an attribute of only a part of the Book—those verses that are

unambiguous in their meaning.

In other words, when God divided the verses of the Book in two categories, the decisive (that is, unambiguous) and ambiguous, it was self-evident that the preciseness and decisiveness mentioned in this verse was not the same preciseness and confirmation which was attributed to the whole Book in verse 11:1.

Likewise, God says: *Allah has revealed the best discourse, a Book conforming* (mutashābihan), *in its various parts, oft-repeated …* (39:23). Here the whole Book has been called mutashābihan (conforming); so we know that in this verse it means something other than mutashābihāt (ambiguous), mentioned in the verse under discussion, in which only a part of the Book is given this name.

The decisive, unambiguous verses have been called *umm al-kitāb* (translated here as the "basis of the Book"). *al-Umm* literally means a thing to which another thing returns; in which it takes refuge. That is why the mother is called *al-umm*. The decisive and unambiguous verses have been given this title because the ambiguous verses return to them. One part of the Book (that is, the ambiguous verses) returns to the other part, (that is, to the unambiguous ones). The possessive case "the basis of the Book" does not imply that this basis is something different from the Book, as is the case, for example, in "the mother of the children"—the mother is different from the children. Rather it denotes a portion or part, as in the phrase, "women of the nation"—women are a part of the nation; in the same way the basis of the Book is a part or portion of the Book. The Book contains some verses that are the basis of the other verses. "Basis" is singular; it shows that there is no difference in the unambiguous decisive verses; all are united and well-connected.

The verse contrasts the decisive verses with the ambiguous ones—which it calls *mutashābihāt*. *al-Tashābuh* means similarity of different things in some of their characteristics and conditions. As mentioned above, God has praised the Qur'an with this word in the verse: *Allah has revealed [to thee] the best discourse, a Book conforming* (mutashābihan) *in its various parts, oft-repeated, whereat do shudder the skins of those who fear their Lord …* (39:23). Obviously, it refers to the fact that there is a consistency in the style of the Qur'an; eloquent composition and elegant modality, coupled with unveiling of realities and guidance to unalloyed truth (as the words used in this verse show) are the common and ever-present

features of the Book.

But *al-tashābuh* mentioned in the verse under discussion means something different. The verse contrasts such verses with the decisive ones that are the basis of the Book, and then goes on to say that those in whose heart there is perversity follow such verses seeking to mislead people and to give them their own interpretation. This context makes it clear that the adjective *mutashābihāt,* refers here to ambiguous verses whose connotation cannot be decided by the hearer just by hearing; his mind remains undecided between one meaning and the other; this continues until he refers to the decisive verses and only then is able to fix the true connotation and semantic value of the ambiguous one. At this stage, the ambiguous verse too becomes decisive and unambiguous but with the aid of decisive verse; while the decisive verse is decisive by itself.

For example, when man first hears the verse, *The Beneficent Allah firmly sat* (istawā) *upon the Throne* (20:5), he is unable to decide whether these words have been used in their literal sense. Then he refers to other verses like: *nothing is like a likeness of Him* (42:11); then only he understands that "firmly sitting on the Throne" means mastery over the kingdom and dominance over the creatures; that it does not mean sitting in a place or on a thing, because it is an attribute of body and God is not a body, because nothing is like Him. Thus, by returning that ambiguous verse to a decisive one, he will translate it as, "The Beneficent God is firm in power."

Another example: When the verse: *Looking to their Lord* (75:23), is returned to the verse: *Visions comprehend Him not, and He comprehends [all] visions* (6:103), it becomes clear that "looking at" in the former does not mean "seeing" with the eyes.

In the same way, when an abrogated verse is returned to the abrogating one, it is known that the order given in the former was for a limited time until the latter was revealed. And so on.

This is the meaning of "decisive" and "ambiguous," as an average man may easily understand, looking at the whole verse together. At least this verse is surely "decisive," even if all others be not.

Just think of the troubles that would crop up if this verse is said to be ambiguous: First, the whole Qur'an would be ambiguous, as no other verse has clearer meaning; second, the categories (decisive and

ambiguous) mentioned in it would be meaningless; third, the remedy shown in the words, "they are the basis of the Book," would be useless; fourth, the words of God: *A Book of which the verses are made plain, an Arabic Qur'an for a people who know, a herald of good news and a warner …* (41:3-4), would not be true; fifth, the argument contained in the verse: *Do they not then meditate on the Qur'an? And if it were from any other than Allah, they would have found in it many a discrepancy* (4:82), would not signify anything. Add to it all those verses that say that the Qur'an is a light, a guidance, a clarification, an explanation and an open reminder, and so on, that shall be deprived of meaning if this verse under discussion is said to be ambiguous.

No one can find a single verse in the Qur'an whose words or phrases are bereft of meaning. Every verse points to its true meaning—either it is the only meaning understood by an Arabic speaking person, or is one of several meanings which may be inferred from it. When a verse is ambiguous and can be interpreted in more than one way, the true meaning is surely one of those interpretations. The true meaning cannot go against the accepted principles of the Qur'an, like the existence of the Creator, His Oneness, coming of the prophets, promulgation of the law, the Day of Judgment and so on. It conforms with those principles, and is based on them; and those principles decide which of the possible meanings is the true one. Thus, some parts of the Qur'an explain the others; some verses are the basis to which the others are returned.

When such a reader shall read this verse, "of it there are some verses decisive, they are the basis of the Book, and others are ambiguous," he will certainly know that the decisive are those verses that contain the accepted principles of religion, and ambiguous are those whose meaning can be decided through these principles.

Question: In every subject there are some principles and some adjuncts; the latter are invariably always referred to the former. It is true in other writings as much as about the Qur'an. But it does not create ambiguity in other books. So why in the Qur'an?

Reply: The Qur'an contains two sets of realities, and there is possibility of ambiguity in each:

First: There are high spiritual and metaphysical realities that are beyond the scope of perception or matter. A man of average understanding, on hearing such verse, is perplexed whether the words have

been used in their literal (that is often physical) meaning, or denote something higher. For example, when he hears the words: *Most surely your Lord is on watch* (89:14); *And your Lord comes …* (89:22), his mind races at first to the literal senses of these words, which if accepted, would show that God is a body! The uncertainty is removed when he refers these verses to the Qur'anic principles which show that God is not a body, and that matter and actions and reactions connected with matter cannot be attributed to Him.

This type of ambiguity occurs in all metaphysical and spiritual talks and writings; it is not peculiar to the Qur'an. Other scriptures—the unaltered parts—when talking of high spiritual things face the same difficulty. Even philosophy suffers from this handicap. To this fact, the Qur'an refers in the following verses: *He sends down water from the heavens, then the valleys flow according to their measure, and the torrent bears along the swelling foam; and from what they melt in the fire for the sake of [making] ornaments or apparatus arises a scum like it; thus does Allah compare truth and falsehood; then as for the scum, it passes away as a worthless thing; and as for that which profits the people, it remains in the earth; thus does Allah set forth parables* (13:17); *Surely We have made it an Arabic Qur'an, so that you may understand. And surely it is in the Original of the Book with Us, truly elevated, full of wisdom* (43:3-4).

Second: There are social legislations and other rules. Some rules, when the reasons for which they were legislated were no longer valid, were abrogated. Moreover, the verses were revealed piecemeal. These two factors create ambiguity in such verses; and it is necessary to return the abrogated verses to the abrogating ones; and then the ambiguousness goes away.

…then as for those in whose hearts there is perversity, they follow the part of it which is ambiguous, seeking to mislead, and seeking to give it [their own] interpretation: *al-Zaygh* is deviation; it is accompanied by anxiety and disquiet. The verse goes on to contrast such people with those who are firmly rooted in knowledge, who say: "We believe in it, it is all from our Lord." It divides the people, so far as their behavior regarding the Qur'an is concerned, in two categories: There are they in whose hearts is deviation, who are worried and perturbed—they follow the ambiguous verses to mislead the people and to interpret the verses according to their own liking. And there are those who are

firmly rooted in knowledge, with stable mind—they follow the decisive verses, and believes in the ambiguous ones but do not act upon them, and pray to God not to make their hearts deviate after guidance has come to them.

It shows that "following ambiguous verses" means to act upon them. They are condemned because they follow the ambiguous verses without returning (that is, referring) them to the decisive ones. Had they referred them to decisive verses before acting upon them, it would, in effect, have been acting upon the decisive verses; and they would have been free from reproach.

al-Fitnah (literally, mischief) means here to mislead the people. Making mischief and misleading are near in meaning. God says that they follow ambiguous verses so that they may mislead the people. Not only this—they want something even more grievous: They seek to acquire the knowledge of the interpretation of the Qur'an; their aim is to find everything from ambiguous verses, so that they would be independent of the decisive ones, and thus the foundation of the religion of God would be destroyed completely.

al-Taʾwīl is derived from *al-awl* (to return). *al-Taʾwīl* of an ambiguous verse is its "returning base" to which it is returned. *al-Taʾwīl* of the Qur'an is the source from which it gets its realities. For want of a better word, it is mostly translated as interpretation, final interpretation, or the end; although these words do not convey its true connotation. We shall try to lead the reader step by step to its real significance.

God has used the word *al-taʾwīl* in various places in the Qur'an:

(1) *And certainly We have brought them a Book which We have made clear with knowledge, a guidance and a mercy for a people who believe. Do they wait for aught but its final interpretation* (taʾwīl)*? On the day when its final interpretation* (taʾwīl) *comes about, those who neglected it before will says: Indeed the apostles of our Lord had brought the truth* … (7:52-53).

That is, what the messengers told their people was all truth: that God is their True Lord; that what they call upon besides God has no reality at all; that the prophethood is truth and the religion is truth; that God will surely raise those who are in graves; in short, all the information about the unseen, truth of which will be manifest on the Day of Resurrection.

Keeping in view this manifestation, it has been said that *al-taʾwīl* of a verse is the fact with which that verse conforms, and that it would be manifested later on; like the happenings on the Day of Judgment that would be in conformity with the informations given by the prophets and the Books.

But this explanation is not comprehensive. It covers only those verses that describe the Divine attributes and actions, and explain the events of the Day of Judgment. But many more verses have no "facts" that would manifest themselves later on: the verses containing law and rules—they give orders, not information, and thus have no facts to conform with; the ones describing what is a clear rational proposition, for example, many ethical teachings—their *taʾwīl* (in the proposed events) is within themselves, it is not to appear later; those narrating the stories of the prophets and past nations—their *taʾwīl* has already appeared, it is not to appear on the Day of Judgment. And the verse under discussion is talking about *al-taʾwīl* of the whole Book: *Taʾwīlahu* means the Book's final interpretation. Clearly the suggested meaning of *al-taʾwīl* cannot be applied here, because, as described above, it is true for only a portion of the Book, not for the whole.

(2) *And this Qur'an is not such as could be forged by those besides Allah, but it is a verification of that which is before it and a clear explanation of the Book, there is no doubt in it, from the Lord of the worlds. Or do they say: He has forged it? Say: Then bring a chapter like this and call whom you can besides Allah, if you are truthful. Nay, they have rejected that of which they have no comprehensive knowledge, and its final interpretation has not yet come to them; even thus did those before them reject [the truth]; see then what was the end of the unjust* (10:37-39).

Here again *al-taʾwīl* has been attributed to the whole Book.

Someone has improved upon the definition of *al-taʾwīl* suggested in (1); he has said: *al-taʾwīl* is the real fact upon which the talk depends. If the talk contains an information, then the event or fact mentioned is its "interpretation"—it does not matter whether the events have already passed, like those of the prophets and past nations, or will be manifested in future, as concerning the verses describing the attributes, names and promises of God and all that is to happen on the Day of Judgment; and if it promulgates a law, then the benefit emanating from it is its "interpretation." Look, for example, at the words of God: *And*

give full measure when you measure out, and weigh with a true balance; this is good and the fairest in the end (17:35). The original word, translated here as "in the end," is *taʾwīla*. It shows that the "final interpretation" of giving full measure and weighing with true balance is the benefit accruing to the society from honest dealing.

But this explanation too is defective, as will be seen from the following clarifications.

First: The verse of measure and weight is clear on one point: the "final interpretation," that is, the social benefit, depends on people's doing what they have been told to do, that is, on their actually giving full measure and correct weight; those benefits would not occur merely by promulgating this rule. In other words, the final interpretation is a real fact (benefit to the society) that emanates from a real fact (measuring and weighing correctly).

Obviously, the "final interpretation" is a real fact; and the thing that "returns" to it, or, let us say, through which that final interpretation emanates is also a real fact—it is not only an information or order. When God says that the verses of the Book have "final interpretation," it means that those verses narrate some real facts (as, for example, in the stories) or are concerned with actually existing practical matters (as, for example, in the verses promulgating laws), which, in their turn, have a final interpretation. This capability of having a final interpretation is not an attribute of the speech; it is the property of the subject matter of the speech.

Second: As explained earlier, *al-taʾwīl* literally means to return, or the returning base. But it is not every return or returning base, but a special type of it. A dependent returns to his principal, but the principal is not his "final interpretation"; all numbers return to "one," but "one" is not their final interpretation.

To understand it more clearly let us look at the Qur'anic story of Moses and al-Khiḍr. He [al-Khiḍr] used the word *al-taʾwīl* twice when he told Moses: *… now I will inform you of the interpretation of that with which you could not have patience* (18:78); *This is the interpretation of that with which you could not have patience* (18:82).

What he explained to Moses was the true significance of his three actions which Moses had misjudged because of his unawareness of their real purposes.

The three events were as follows:

(1) *… until when they embarked in the boat he made a hole in it …* (18:71).

(2) *… until when they met a boy, he slew him* (18:74).

(3) *… until when they came to the people of a town, they asked them for food, but they refused to receive them as guests. Then they found in it a wall which was on the point of falling, so he set it upright* (18:77).

And this is how Moses misconstrued these events:

(1) *[Moses] said: Have you made a hole in it to drown its inmates? Certainly you have done a grievous thing* (18:71).

(2) *[Moses] said: Have you slain an innocent person otherwise than for manslaughter? Certainly you have done a horrible thing* (18:74).

(3) *[Moses] said: If you had pleased, you might certainly have taken a recompense for it* (18:77).

And the following are the "final interpretations" of them, as explained by al-Khiḍr:

(1) *As for the boat, it belonged to [some] poor men who worked on the river and I wished that I should damage it, and there was behind them a king who seized every boat by force* (18:79).

(2) *And as for the boy, his parents were believers and we feared lest he should oppress them by disobedience [to them] and disbelief [in Allah]. So we desired that their Lord might give them in his place one better than him in purity and nearer to having compassion* (18:80-81).

(3) *And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys in the city, and there was beneath it a treasure belonging to them, and their father was a righteous man; so your Lord desired that they should attain their maturity and take out their treasure, a mercy from your Lord …* (18:82).

Then he answered all the objection of Moses in a short sentence: *And I did not do it of my own accord* (*ibid.*).

It is now obvious that the "return" mentioned in these verses is just as a punishment given to a child "returns" to his character building—he is punished for the "purpose" of his reform. It is this type of "return" that is meant by *al-taʾwīl* in the above-mentioned verses. It does not

mean that conformity which a true information has with its fact—as the sentence, Zayd came, has with the coming of Zayd.

For further clarification let us look at uses of this word in Chapter 12 (Joseph):

When Joseph said to his father: O my father! surely I saw eleven stars and the sun and the moon—I saw them prostrating before me (12:4); *And he raised his parents upon the throne and they [all] fell down in prostration before him, and he said: O my father! this is the interpretation of my vision of old; my Lord has indeed made it to be true …* (12:100).

In this instance, the dream he saw of the sun, the moon and eleven stars prostrating before him "returned" to the prostration of his parents and eleven brothers. But this "returning" was just as an allegory returns to the thing for which it is used.

The same is the case with the following verses:

And the king said: Surely I see eleven fat kine which seven lean ones devoured; and seven green ears and [seven] others dry; O Chiefs! explain to me my dream, if you can interpret the dream. They said: Confused dreams, and we do not know the interpretation of [such] dreams. And of the two [prisoners] he who had found deliverance and remembered after a long time said: I will inform you of its interpretation, so let me go. Joseph! O truthful one! explain to us seven fat kine which seven lean ones devoured, and seven green ears and [seven] others dry, that I may go back to the people so that they may know. He said: You shall sow for seven years continuously, then what you reap leave it in its ear except a little of which you eat. Then there shall come after that seven years of hardship which shall eat away all that you have beforehand and laid up in store for them, except a little of what you shall have preserved (12:43-48).

And two youths entered the prison with him. One of them said: I saw myself pressing wine. And the other said: I saw myself carrying bread on my head, of which birds ate. Inform us of its interpretation; surely we see you to be of the doers of good (12:36).

O my two mates of the prison! as for one of you, he shall give his lord to drink wine; and as for the other, he shall be crucified, so that the birds shall eat from his head; the matter is decreed concerning which you enquired (12:41).

… and teach you the interpretation of saying … (12:6).

… and that We might teach him the interpretation of saying … (12:21).

… and taught me of the interpretation of sayings … (12:101).

The word *al-taʾwīl* in all these verses is used for the events to which the dreams referred. The dreamers saw the events not as they actually happened but in their allegorical forms; and Joseph "returned" those allegories to the real events which they represented.

The dreams were the forms, and their interpretations were the substances behind those forms. In other words *al-taʾwīl* (interpretation) is the reality that is allegorically represented by the words or expressions; those words or expressions must be "returned" to the realities which they represent, if one wants to know their true significance.

The verse quoted above in the story of Moses and al-Khiḍr (peace be on them) also were of the same nature, as are the words of God mentioned earlier: *And give full measure when you measure out, and weigh with a true balance; this is good and the fairest in the end* (17:35).

Pondering over the verses about the Day of Judgment, one realizes that this word has been used in the same meaning in the earlier-mentioned verses: *Nay, they have rejected that of which they have no comprehensive knowledge, and its final interpretation has not yet come to them* (10:39); *Do they wait for aught but its final interpretations? On the day when its final interpretation comes about…* (7:53). Look at verses such as: *Certainly you were heedless of it, but now We have removed from you your veil, so your sight today is sharp* (50:22). It shows that the vision with which man will see the informations brought by the prophets and the Book turning into reality will be of a different kind—that perception will not be like this physical perception, which we are used to in this world. Even the manifestation of the Day of Judgment as well as the governing principle of that day shall be something beyond the worldly perception of ours. (It will be further explained somewhere else.) Therefore, when it is said that the informations given in the Book and tradition shall "return" to their true meanings on the Day of Judgment it is not the same thing as fulfilment of a forecast in future.

From the above discourse, it becomes clear that:

First: The sentence, "This verse has an *al-taʾwīl* to which it returns," conveys a meaning different from the sentence, "this verse is ambiguous and it returns to a decisive verse."

Second: *al-Taʾwīl* is not a peculiarity of the ambiguous verses; it is an attribute of the whole Qur'an; decisive verses have their *al-taʾwīl,*

as do the ambiguous ones.

Third: *al-Taʾwīl* is not the meaning of a word; it is some real fact found outside the imagination. When we say that this verse has an *al-taʾwīl,* we mean that the verse describes a real fact (past or future) or a real happening, which in its turn points to another reality—and that is its *al-taʾwīl,* or final interpretation.

Note: In later days, this word was taken to mean "the interpretation that is against the apparent meaning of the word." But it is not interpretation; it is misinterpretation, an abuse of language. This wrong connotation was unknown at the time when the Qur'an was revealed, and there is no evidence to suggest that this late meaning is intended in this verse.

…but none knows its interpretation except Allah: Apparently, the pronoun, "its" refers to "the part of it which is ambiguous"; also, the pronoun, "it" in the immediately preceding phrase, "to give it (their own) interpretation," refers to the same. But it does not necessarily mean that only the ambiguous verses have their "final interpretations."

Another possibility: This "its" may refer to "the Book," as does the pronoun, "it," of the phrase, "they follow the part of it."

The restriction, "none … except," apparently means that the knowledge of its interpretation is restricted to God. The word, "and," in the next words, "and those firmly rooted in knowledge" is to begin a new sentence; and this new sentence describes the state of the second category which is in clear contrast with the first one, "those in whose hearts there is perversity." People, in their acceptance of the Book, are of two categories; those who follow the ambiguous part of the Qur'an, and those who, when coming to such a verse, say, "We believe in it, it is all from our Lord." And what is the basis of this difference? It is the perversity of the hearts, on one side, and firmly rooted knowledge, on the other.

The word, "and," in "and those firmly rooted in knowledge…" is not a conjunctive, that is, it does not say that "those firmly rooted in knowledge" know, as God does, the interpretation of the ambiguous verses. Had it been so, the Messenger of God would certainly have been one of them; rather he would be the first and foremost of them—it is unthinkable that the Qur'an was revealed to him and he did not know what it meant! And, as mentioned in volume 4, whenever the Qur'an

mentions a group or describes the virtue of a people and the Messenger is among them, it first invariably mentions his name separately, and then the whole group is mentioned together. This protocol maintains the dignity and prestige of the Messenger. Look for example at the following verses: *The Messenger believes in what has been revealed to him from his Lord, and [so do] the believers* (2:285); *Then Allah sent down His tranquillity upon His Messenger and upon the believes* (9:26); *But the Messenger and those who believe with him …* (9:88); *… and this Prophet and those who believe …* (3:68); *… on the day on which Allah will not abase the Prophet and those who believe with him* (66:8).

Therefore, if God had intended to say that *those who firmly rooted in knowledge* knew the final interpretation of the ambiguous verses—and the Messenger of God is certainly one of them—He would have mentioned his name separately and said: "none knows its interpretation except God and His Messenger and those firmly rooted in knowledge." However, it may be argued that as the verse had begun with the words, *He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book*, it necessarily showed that the Messenger knew the Book; therefore, there was no need to mention his name again.

Apparently, the knowledge of the interpretation is restricted to God—so far as this verse is concerned. Although there are exceptions to it, they only serve to prove the rule. There are, for instance, several verses that say that the knowledge of the unseen is restricted to God; yet an exception is given in the verses: *The Knower of the unseen! so He does not reveal His secrets to any except to whom He chooses of an apostle …* (72:26-27).

Also, there would be no difficulty if other verses were to show that the very people who were firmly rooted in knowledge were exempted from this restriction. This verse describes one characteristic of those people—that they believe in the ambiguous verses, but refrain from acting upon them and leave the matter in the hand of God, contrary to the behavior of those whose hearts are perverted. If other verses showed that all or some of those who were firmly rooted in knowledge knew the reality of the Qur'an and the interpretation of its verses, then it could not be said that they were contradictory to this verse—because their subject matter would be quite different from this one.

…and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: We believe

in it, it is all from our Lord: *al-Rusūkh* is to be firmly rooted, fixed or established. The contrast shown between them and those whose hearts are perverted, and then the praise that they say, "We believe in it, it is all from our Lord," gives their full description: They have knowledge of God and of His signs, a knowledge that is immune from every doubt and suspicion; their knowledge of decisive verses is firmly established, there is no uncertainty in it; they believe in it and act upon it; and when they find an ambiguous verse, their hearts are not perturbed, nor it affects their knowledge of the decisive verses; so they believe in that ambiguous verse, but refrain from acting upon it.

Their declaration, "We believe in it, it is all from our Lord," gives both the proof and the conclusion. Decisive verses and ambiguous ones, all are from God—therefore, one must believe in all of them. Decisive verses have clear meanings; therefore, one must also act upon them; the ambiguous ones also must be believed in, because they are from God; but only that meaning can be accepted and acted upon that does not go against a decisive verse. In other words, ambiguous verses must be returned to the decisive ones.

Therefore, the sentence, "it is all from our Lord," is the proof of two things: (i) Decisive verses must be believed in and followed; (ii) Ambiguous ones must be believed in, but for the purpose of action they should be returned to the decisive ones.

…and none do mind except those having understanding: *al-Tadhakkur* (translated here as "to mind") means to turn towards the premises to get to the conclusion. It has been mentioned above that the believers' declaration, "it is all from our Lord," was their proof by which they found the righteousness of their behavior; therefore, God called it *al-tadhakkur* and praised them for it.

al-Albāb is plural of *al-lubb* which means an understanding, clear and free from defects. The people of understanding have been praised very handsomely by God in His Book. According to the Qur'an, it is they who believe in God, turn towards Him and follow the best word; it is they who always remember their Lord, and consequently acquire true knowledge through its premises, and they become the people of wisdom and knowledge. Read the following verses:

And [as for] those who keep off from the worship of the idols and turn to Allah, they shall have good news; therefore, give good news to My

servants, those who listen to the word, then follow the best of it; those are they whom Allah has guided, and those it is who are the men of understanding (39:17-18); *Most surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and the day there are signs for men of understanding, those who remember Allah standing and sitting and lying on their sides and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth …* (3:190-191).

This unceasing remembrance, and the resulting humility and submissiveness keep them pondering on the signs of God from which they get the true and real knowledge. God says: *… and none minds but he who turns [to Him] again and again* (40:13); *… and none do mind except those having understanding* (2:269; 3:7).

رَبَّنَا لَا تُزِغْ قُلُوبَنَا بَعْدَ إِذْ هَدَيْتَنَا وَهَبْ لَنَا مِنْ لَدُنْكَ رَحْمَةً ۚ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْوَهَّابُ ﴿٨﴾

(3:8) ***Our Lord! make not our hearts to deviate after Thou hast guided us [aright]; and grant us from Thee mercy; surely Thou art the most liberal Giver.***

This prayer is an indication of their firmly rooted knowledge. They know their Lord and understand His power. They believe that everything belongs to Him only, and that they have no authority whatsoever on their own selves. There is a possibility that God may cause their hearts to deviate even after their firmly rooted knowledge. Therefore, they seek refuge in their Lord and ask Him not to make their hearts deviate after He has guided them aright, and to grant them His own mercy so that this bounty may remain with them for ever and ever, helping them to walk on the straight path, bringing them nearer and nearer to their Lord.

Why did they ask from God to grant them mercy from Himself, when they had already asked Him not to make their hearts deviate? It is because non-deviation of heart does not necessarily mean remaining firmly rooted in knowledge. It is possible that one's heart is not deviated, but at the same time is deprived of the knowledge—one in this condition would be figuratively speaking in a vegetative state: neither blessed with knowledge nor cursed with deviation; rather in a state of ignorance and feebleness. But they know that their firmly rooted knowledge is a must for them; so they pray for the Divine mercy, so as not to be deprived of that knowledge.

Apart from that, they are still on their way; and before the journey is completed they are in need of every type of mercy—the mercies that cannot be known or counted except by God. Those knowledgeable believers are fully aware of this great need of theirs. The sentence coming after this verse, "Our Lord! surely Thou art the Gatherer of men on a day about which there is no doubt," shows their awareness of their dependence on Divine mercy till the end of this journey.

The first prayer (*make not our hearts deviate after Thou hast guided us aright*) seeks to ward off a misfortune; the second one (*and grant us from Thee mercy*) pleads for the greatest fortune, the Divine mercy that would keep their hearts alive for ever. The word, "mercy" has been used as a common noun, and it has been qualified with the phrase, "from Thee"; they have used this style to show that they do not know anything about this mercy; the only thing they know is that, but for this mercy of their Lord, they cannot succeed in any way.

They sought refuge in God from the deviation of their hearts and asked from Him His mercy. It proves that they knew that everything belonged to God; their eyes were directly on the Real Cause, ignoring all the middle causes.

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رَبَّنَا إِنَّكَ جَامِعُ النَّاسِ لِيَوْمٍ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُخْلِفُ الْمِيعَادَ ﴿٩﴾

(3:9) ***Our Lord! surely Thou art the Gatherer of men on a day about which there is no doubt; surely Allah fails not [His] promise.***

This pleading of theirs gives the reason of their prayer for mercy. They know that this system of creation, this call to the religion, this striving by man in his path of life, all are precursors of their gathering together on the Day of Resurrection when no one shall avail anyone and none shall be helped except by the Divine mercy. God says: *Surely the day of discrimination is their appointed time, of all of them; the day on which a friend shall not avail [his] friend aught, nor shall they be helped, save those on whom Allah shall have mercy …* (44:40-42). That is why they prayed to Him for His mercy; and left all its details to His discretion, so that it be of real benefit to them.

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They said that there was no doubt about that day. It showed their deep concern about the mercy asked for. Then they ended their prayer on the sentence, *surely Allah fails not [His] promise*. They were firmly rooted in knowledge. Knowledge about a thing is not firmly established

unless one knows the cause from which that thing emanates. They had no doubt about the Day of Resurrection, because it had been promised by God; and God does not fail His promise.

This pleading contains a proposition followed by its reason. They have used the same style in the whole invocation from the very beginning:

They said, "We believe in it," and gave its reason in the next sentence, "it is all from our Lord."

Then they prayed, "Our Lord! make not our hearts deviate," and added a phrase that gives a sort of its reason, "after Thou hast guided us (aright)."

Then came the pleading, "and grant us from Thee mercy," followed by its reason, "surely Thou art the most liberal Giver." In fact there is a double proposition and likewise a double reason in this prayer. They did not ask for "any" mercy, but a mercy "from Thee." Thereafter, the sentence giving the reason contains two singular pronouns of second person: *Ka* (Thou) and *anta* (Thou) and the predicate has been given the definite article, *al* (the); these two restrictive devices emphasize that the only Giver is God; and hence they have asked for only His mercy.

They are the people who believed in their Lord and remained firm on it. Therefore, God guided them aright and perfected their wisdom. Now they do not utter any word except with knowledge, nor do they do any work that is not based on knowledge. Consequently, God praised them by calling them as *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge*; and gave them the title of "people of understanding."

If you read once again how God has praised the people of understanding, you will see that all those attributes perfectly fit these people. Look again, for example, at the verses: *And [as for] those who keep off from the worship of the idols and turn to Allah, they shall have good news; therefore give good news to My servants, those who listen to the word, then follow the best of it; those are they whom Allah has guided, and those it is who are the men of understanding* (39:17-18). These verses say that the people of understanding have faith, follow the best of the word and turn to God. The same characteristics have been attributed in this verse to those who are firmly rooted in knowledge.

They have used the second person singular pronouns for God throughout the prayer; but have ended it with mentioning the Divine

name (and thus switching to third person) and said: *surely Allah fails not [His] promise*. It is because this promise is not especially for them; it is a general promise; therefore they changed the phrase, "Our Lord" to the Divine name "God," as this name shows His sovereignty over all things.

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A Detailed Discourse about the Decisive & Ambiguous Verses and Interpretation.

What we have explained above about the meaning of decisive and ambiguous verses, as well as their "interpretation," is what one understands after deep consideration of the Qur'anic verses and the traditions of our Imams.

But the Muslims have entangled themselves in sharp controversies about every aspect of these subjects right from the early days; and divergent views have been quoted regarding every detail even from the companions of the Prophet and their disciples. And in all this confusing polemics, not a single explanation conforms with ours; we may say that none of them even superficially resembles it.

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The main cause of this conflict is the confusion which exists about the subject matter—they have mixed the discussion of decisive and ambiguous verses with that of interpretation. As a result, they are in a muddle concerning the issues to be decided; there is disorderliness in their ways of arguments and they are confused about the conclusions drawn from their discourses. We propose to give a systematic analysis of all their opinions under different headings.

1. The Decisive and the Ambiguous Verses

al-Iḥkām (to make precise, to conform, to make decisive, to strengthen) and *al-tashābuh* (conformity of one thing with other, ambiguity) are commonly used words with clear meanings. God has attributed these adjectives and verbs to the whole Book: *[This is] a Book whose verses were confirmed …* (11:1); *… a Book conforming in its various parts, oft-repeated …* (39:23). These verses point to the fact that the whole Book has a forceful eloquence, and a well-integrated style, and that its various parts conform with each other in structural elegance and elocutionary beauty—and its every word leads to sublime realities.

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But when we look at the verse, "He it is Who has sent down to thee

the Book, of it there are some verses decisive, they are the basis of the Book, and others are ambiguous … ," we know that the adjectives, *al-muḥkamāt* (confirmed, decisive) and *al-mutashābihāt* (conforming, ambiguous), as used in this verse, mean something different from the earlier mentioned two verses. Why? Because this verse divides the verses in two categories and then says that only one is "decisive" and the other is "ambiguous." These words in this verse cannot have the same meanings which were applicable to the whole Book.

The exegetes should have endeavoured to find out from the Qur'anic verses themselves which meanings could be applied in this case. Instead, various people have interpreted them, according to their own thinking, in more than fifteen ways:

First: The decisive are the three verses in Chapter 6 (Cattle):

> *Say: Come I will recite what your Lord has forbidden to you…* (6:151)
>
> *And do not approach the property of the orphan except in the best manner…*(6:152)
>
> *And [know] that this is My path, the right one therefore follow it* …(6:153)

And the ambiguous are those parts that confused the Jews, and they are the "letter symbols" revealed at the beginning of many Qur'anic chapters, like *Alif lām mīm rā, Ḥā mīm* and so on. As it happened, the Jews tried to interpret them in the light of their numerical values, and they thought that *Alif lām mīm* hinted that the Muslim nation would continue for only 71 (1+30+40) years. Then other "letter symbols" were revealed, and the Jews became confused.

This opinion has been attributed to Ibn ᶜAbbās, a companion of the Prophet.

Comment: First, it is an opinion without any proof or evidence. Second, there is no evidence that decisive and ambiguous verses are only those three and the letter symbols respectively. Third, if we accept this view, then almost the whole Qur'an—except those three verses and the letter symbols—would fall in a third category "non-decisive, non-ambiguous"; but the verse clearly divides the whole Book in two categories only.

The fact is that attribution of this view to Ibn ᶜAbbās is out of place. According to the narration, he had said that the three verses

were decisive—he had not said that the decisive verses were only these three. It is reported in *al-Durr al-manthūr* from Saʿīd b. Manṣūr, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, al-Ḥākim (who said that the tradition was correct) and Ibn Marduwayh that ʿAbdullāh b. Qays said: "I heard Ibn ʿAbbās saying about the words of God: *of it there are some verses decisive;* he said: three verses at the end of the Chapter of the Cattle are decisive: *Say: Come …* and two following verses."

That he mentioned these verses just as an example, is supported by another tradition narrated from him by the same author—that explaining the words of God, "verses decisive," he said: "From here, *Say: Come …* up to three verses, and from here, *And your Lord has commanded that you shall not worship [any] but Him …* (17:23-25) up to three verses."

Both traditions clearly show that he mentioned these verses as examples of decisive verses; not that the decisive verses were only these.

Second: Opposite of the first view: The decisive are the letter symbols at the beginning of various chapters; and ambiguous are all the other verses.

It has been attributed to Abū Fākhitah; he said about the words of God, *they are the basis of the Book,* that they are the opening words of the chapters; the Qur'an is composed from them: *Alif lām mīm; this Book, there is no doubt in it,* the Chapter of the Cow is composed from them: *Alif lām mīm; Allah is He besides Whom there is no god,* the Chapter of the Family of ʿImrān is composed from them.

A similar interpretation is reported from Saʿīd b. Jubayr, about the words: *they are the basis of the Book.* He said: "The basis of the Book, because they are written in all the books."

It appears that, according to Abū Fākhitah and Saʿīd b. Jubayr, the letter symbols at the beginning of the chapters are just that—the symbols of the alphabets; and that by putting them in the beginning, God has drawn the attention of the hearers to the fact that this Book, which is revealed to you, is made up of these alphabets from which words and sentences are made, and yet no one can bring a like of it.

It is one of the views about the significance of the letter symbols.

Comment: First, it is based on a premise (the supposed significance of the letter symbols) which itself is without any proof or evidence. Second, it is not in conformity with the verse under discussion. According to this interpretation the whole Qur'an, other than the letter

symbols, is "ambiguous"; and God has in this verse condemned those who follow the ambiguous verses, and has said that it results from perversity of their hearts; it means that one should not follow any verse of the Qur'an, except the letter symbols—and there is nothing to follow in those symbols! On the other hand, God praises those who follow the Qur'an; in fact, to follow it is the most important obligation. For example, He says: … *and follow the light which has been sent down with him, these it is that are the successful* (7:157).

Third: Ambiguous means unspecified, indistinct, vague verses, and decisive are the specified and clear ones.

Comment: The particulars mentioned in the verse, about the decisive and ambiguous verses, do not fit this interpretation.

A word is called vague and indistinct, when various aspects of its meaning are mixed together and it is difficult to disentangle them and to know which one is really intended. Such a word is not acted upon unless it is joined by another clarifying word which makes its meaning clear, and then it is acted upon and followed.

It must be noted here that, in the above-mentioned case, what is followed is the same previously indistinct and vague word as clarified by the distinct and clear one. The clarifying word, in itself, is not followed.

Therefore, if ambiguous means the vague and indistinct verse and decisive is the distinct and clear one, then it is the ambiguous verse that should be followed when clarified by the decisive one—and not the decisive verse itself. Accordingly, to follow an ambiguous verse should not invite condemnation and should not be associated with perversity of heart.

And coming to the practical side, no one—neither those whose hearts are perverted nor those who are firmly rooted in knowledge—follows a vague word unless it is clarified. But God condemns the former for following ambiguous verses. It means that ambiguous verses are not vague.

Fourth: Ambiguous are those verses which were abrogated; one believe in them but does not act upon them. Decisive are the verses that abrogated the former, because they are believed in and acted upon.

This opinion has been ascribed to Ibn ʿAbbās, Ibn Masʿūd and some other companions. And that is why Ibn ʿAbbās used to say that he knew the interpretation of the Qur'an.

Comment: First, even if we accept this explanation as correct, there is no proof that only the abrogated verses are ambiguous. The description that some people follow the ambiguous verses to mislead the people and to interpret them in their own way, is true about a lot of non-abrogated verses too, like the ones about the attributes and actions of God. Second, this explanation leaves a majority of the verses unaccounted for—those that neither abrogated any, nor were abrogated by any. Was there a third category, which God did not mention?

And so far as the view of Ibn ʿAbbās is concerned, it is known that his explanation of decisive and ambiguous verses was more comprehensive, and that he mentioned these two types—abrogated ones and those that abrogate—just as examples. It is quoted in *al-Durr al-manthūr* from Ibn Jarīr, Ibn al-Mundhir and Ibn Abī Ḥātim, through the chain of ʿAlī, from Ibn ʿAbbās that he said: "The decisive verses are the ones that abrogated other verses, contain the lawful and unlawful, describe the limits and duties, and (in short) those which are believed in (and acted upon); and the ambiguous are the ones that are abrogated, in which there is some juxtaposition, the parables, the oaths, and that which is believed in but not acted upon."

Fifth: Decisive are those verses whose proof is clear and evident, like the proofs of Oneness of God, and of His power and wisdom. And ambiguous are those which require thinking and consideration.

Comment: What is the meaning of a verse having clear and evident proof? Does it mean that the main idea of a verse should have a rational and self-evident proof? If so, then all verses containing the laws or explaining the duties would become ambiguous, because not a single such law has a self-evident rational proof. Consequently, acting upon the verses containing the rules of the shariah would be condemnable! And Islam says that they must be followed and acted upon! Or does it mean that the idea of a verse should have a clear proof from the Book itself? If so, then all the verses do have this quality. And why not? After all, it is a Book, conforming in its various parts, oft repeated, a light, a clear discourse. So, according to this interpretation, all the verses would be decisive, and there would remain no ambiguous one. But the Qur'an says that some of its verses are ambiguous.

Sixth: Decisive is everything that can be known with the help of a clear or hidden proof; and ambiguous is that which cannot be known

in any way, like the time of resurrection.

Comment: Being decisive or ambiguous are the characteristics of the verses of the Book. The Arabic name of a verse is *al-āyah* (sign), because it shows a reality from the Divine realities. Whatever is described by a Qur'anic verse cannot be said, by any stretch of imagination, to be "unknowable"; nor is it incomprehensible—it may surely be correctly understood either by itself or with the help of other verses. How can it be said that a verse intends to say something but its words fail to convey the intended meaning? God has described His Book as the guidance, the light and the clarification; and that even unbelievers could comprehend it—let alone the believers: *A revelation from the Beneficent, the Merciful Allah, a Book of which the verses are made plain, an Arabic Qur'an for a people who know; a herald of good news and a warner but most of them turn aside so they hear not* (41:2-4); *Do they not then meditate on the Qur'an? And if it were from any other than Allah, they would have found in it many a discrepancy* (4:82). Obviously, no subject matter dealt with in the Qur'an is incomprehensible or unknowable. And what cannot be known, like the time of resurrection and other secrets of the unseen, has not been touched by any verse. So, how can any verse be called ambiguous in the suggested meaning?

In fact, this explanation confuses between the meanings of "ambiguous" and "final interpretation," (the true significance of which has already been described by us in the beginning).

Seventh: Decisive are the verses containing the laws and the shariah*;* and ambiguous are the other verses, some of which affects the others.

This opinion has been attributed to Mujahid among others.

Comment: This interpretation is wrong in both ways: Apparently "affecting each other" means helping in fixation of the intended meaning, as a specifying word qualifies a general one; or as a context pinpoints the idea conveyed. If so, then even the verses containing the laws should be counted as ambiguous, because they too are subject to this interaction.

On the other hand, this interpretation gives an impression about the basic characteristic of a decisive verse: That there is no vagueness in its meaning; it distinctly points to its intended idea; that its import is known by itself, while others' sense is understood by its help. If it

is so, and if it is accepted that only the verses containing the laws are decisive, then nothing of the Qur'anic knowledge and realities (except the rules of the shariah) can be known; there is supposedly no decisive verse in that group and, therefore, those verses cannot be referred to any decisive one, and consequently, their substance would remain unknowable for ever.

Eighth: Decisive is the verse that cannot be interpreted except in one way; ambiguous is the one that may be interpreted in more than one way.

It has been ascribed to al-Shāfiʿī. Probably, he means that the decisive verse "apparently" has only one meaning; and the ambiguous has more than one "apparent" meaning.

Comment: This "explanation" just changes one word with another: "decisive" has been changed to "one having only one meaning," and "ambiguous" to "one having more than one meaning."

Apart from that in his view, *al-taʾwīl* (interpretation) signifies the meaning of the word; and, as we have earlier explained, it is not correct. If "interpretation" is the same thing as the meaning of a word, then its knowledge could not be restricted to God, (or to God and those firmly rooted in knowledge). We know that the verses of the Qur'an explain the meanings of each other; and believers and unbelievers; those firmly rooted in knowledge and those in whose hearts is perversity—all equally understand this meaning.

Ninth: Decisive are those verses which have been confirmed and in which the news of the prophets and their peoples has been given in detail; and those "conforming to each other" are those stories that have been repeatedly mentioned in various chapters and whose words conform to each other.

According to this interpretation, the two categories—decisive and ambiguous—are confined to the stories only.

Comment: First, there is no proof that the Qur'anic division is confined to the verses of the stories. Second, the given characteristics of decisive and ambiguous verses—that those who follow the ambiguous do so to mislead the people and to give the verse their own interpretation; and that following the decisive verse has no such defect—do not agree with this explanation. These characteristics are found in other verses as much as in stories, and in once narrated story (like instituting

the *khilāfah* in the earth) as well as in oft-repeated ones.

Tenth: Ambiguous is that verse which needs explanation; decisive one does not need it. This view is ascribed to Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal.

Comment: The verse containing the shariah need to be explained by the Prophet, although they are certainly among the decisive ones. On the other hand, the abrogated verses are among the ambiguous ones (as was described earlier), and they do not need any explanation (because they are not acted upon), even though in all other respects they are like any other verse of the shariah.

The suggested meaning is, therefore, neither all inclusive nor exclusive.

Eleventh: Decisive is the verse that is believed in and acted upon; and ambiguous is believed in but not acted upon.

It has been attributed to Ibn Taymiyyah. Perhaps, he wanted to say that the stories and informations were ambiguous, and those containing the laws were decisive. If this is the idea behind this explanation, then it could be counted as a separate view; otherwise, it could be fitted to many of the previously mentioned opinions.

Comment: It would mean that all verses, other than those concerning the shariah, would be ambiguous. In other words, it would be impossible to have knowledge of any Divine reality or any spiritual fact mentioned in the Qur'an (other than the matters of law) because there would be no decisive verse in that group to which the rest of it could be referred.

On the other hand, abrogated verses are concerned with the shariah, but certainly they are not decisive.

Apparently, he looked at the words, *… those in whose hearts there is perversity, they follow the part of it which is ambiguous, and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: We believe in it, it is all from our Lord*; and then paraphrased it in these words that decisive verses are believed in and acted upon while ambiguous ones are believed in but not acted upon. He did not realize that this believing in and following, or only believing without following, expresses the duty of the believer 'after' he has distinguished between the decisive and ambiguous verses. In other words, it is not the criterion by which one may know the decisive verses from the ambiguous; there must be some other test to distinguish between the two categories.

Twelfth: Ambiguous are those verses which describe the attributes, whether of God, for example, All-knowing, Powerful, Wise and All-aware, or of His prophets, for example, the verse about Jesus: … *and His Word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a Spirit [proceeding] from Him* … (4:171), and other verses of this type.

It too has been attributed to Ibn Taymiyyah.

Comment: Accepted that the verses of attributes are ambiguous; but there is no evidence that ambiguous verses are confined to only those.

He has written a long passage from which it appears that he takes these two terms in their literal meaning. A gist of his discourse is as follows:

> "Decisive is the verse whose meaning is distinct; ambiguous is the one which has two or more possible meanings. The two concepts are relative: may be a verse is ambiguous for an ordinary man, and distinct and decisive for a more knowledgeable one. This relativity manifest's itself very clearly in the verses of attributes. Most of the people fail to understand their significance. Their comprehension does not go beyond the limits of the matter. They interpret the Divine Attributes—knowledge, power, sight, hearing, pleasure, displeasure, hand, eye and other such expressions—in material terms, or in wrong ways. Thus people are misled, wrong beliefs and practices crop up and various schools of thoughts come into being.
>
> "So this is the meaning of decisive and ambiguous. Both are within the purview of human knowledge. What cannot be known is the interpretation of ambiguous verses, that is, the reality that is hidden behind such verses. Let us say that we know the meaning of the words of God: *Most surely Allah has power over everything,* and *Most surely Allah knows everything.* Still, we do not know the reality of His power and knowledge. The same is true about all Divine Attributes and actions. It is this final interpretation of the ambiguous verses which no one knows except God."

We shall comment on it when discussing the subject of "interpretation."

Thirteenth: Decisive is what can be reached by the understanding;

ambiguous is opposite to it.

Comment: First, it is an opinion that is not supported by any proof. Second, it is correct that the Qur'anic verses may be divided in this way; but this division is totally different from that which groups the verses in two categories of decisive and ambiguous. The characteristics of decisive and ambiguous do not fit to the two sides of this division. Third, it is not all inclusive; the verses of the shariah are surely decisive, and human understanding has no way to reach them.

Fourteenth: Ambiguous is a verse whose interpretation is against the apparent meaning of its words. Decisive is opposite to it; its interpretation is the same as its apparent meaning. This is the view popular among the later scholars; and they use the word *al-taʾwīl* for an interpretation that is against the apparent meaning of the words.

Perhaps, the same was meant by the scholar who said: Decisive is that verse whose interpretation is the same as its revelation, and ambiguous is the one that cannot be comprehended except through interpretation.

Comment: It is a new terminology and the given characteristics of decisive and ambiguous verses do not agree with it.

Ambiguous is an expression that is capable of more than one meaning; but only one of those meanings is intended. And that intended meaning is not its "interpretation." The interpretation, as explained earlier, is a common factor of all the Qur'anic verses, the decisive and the ambiguous alike.

Moreover, there is not a single verse in the Qur'an whose connotation is against its apparent meaning. A few verses that give such impression, are governed by the decisive verses—and the Qur'anic verses explain each other. Obviously, a meaning based on context and associations cannot be said to be against the apparent meaning; and especially when the Speaker Himself declares beforehand that various parts of His speech are all related to each other and should be understood with each other's help, and that no difference can be found in it if one ponders over it; *Do they not then meditate on the Qur'an? And if it were from any other than Allah, they would have found in it many a discrepancy* (4:82).

Fifteenth: If there is unanimity about the interpretation of a verse, then it is decisive; otherwise, it is ambiguous.

This opinion is ascribed to al-Aṣamm. Perhaps, what he says may be expressed in other words: There is no difference of opinion as to what a decisive verse means; while there is always such a difference about an ambiguous one.

Comment: If that be the criterion, then the whole Qur'an would become ambiguous, contrary to the division mentioned in this verse. Not a single verse is free from controversy; there is always some difference either about its word or its meaning; always some disagreement whether its apparent meaning is intended. This has led some people to say that the whole Qur'an is ambiguous; and he offers the verse: … *a Book conforming in its various parts* (39:23), as his proof. He seems oblivious of the inherent contradiction in this reasoning: This argument means that at least this verse is decisive so that it may be relied upon, while he wants to prove from it that not a single verse is decisive!

Some others, believing that the whole Qur'an was ambiguous, said that the apparent meanings of the Qur'an are not a proof at all.

Sixteenth: Ambiguous is the verse that is difficult to explain, because it resembles another verse—the difficulty may arise because of the word or because of the meaning. It is the opinion of al-Rāghib. He has written in *al-Mufradāt al-Qur'an:*

> "Ambiguous verses of the Qur'an are those that are difficult to explain because of their resemblance to other verses—it is either in word or in meaning. The religious scholars have said: 'The ambiguous is the verse whose apparent meaning does not indicate its real connotation.' The fact is that the verses, when compared to each other, are of three kinds: The decisive, the ambiguous, and that which is decisive in some respects and ambiguous in others.
>
> "The ambiguous, in all, is of three kinds: ambiguous in word, ambiguous in meaning, and ambiguous in word and meaning both.
>
> "The ambiguous in word is of two kinds: Where ambiguousness is caused by one word—it is not a commonly used word, like *al-abb* (herbage) and *yaziffūn* (they are hastening); or has more than one meaning, like *al-yad* (hand, power) and *al-ʾayn* (eye, sun, supervision)—and where ambiguousness results from the structure of the sentence. This may happen

in one of the three ways: when some explanatory words are omitted for the sake of brevity, for example: *And if you fear that you cannot act equitably towards orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two and three and four* (4:3); when some words are added into the sentence for some reason, for example: *There is nothing like the likeness of Him* (42:11)—it would have been easier to understand for a common man if it were said, 'there is nothing like Him'; and when a word is transferred from its usual place for rhyming or other reasons, for example: … *Who revealed the Book to His servant and did not make in it any crookedness. Rightly directing …* (18:1-2)—the word, 'Rightly directing' describes the state of *the Book* and should have come soon after it; another example: … *and were it not for believing men and believing women … had they been widely separated …* (48:25).

"And the ambiguous according to meaning are the attributes of God and details of the Day of Resurrection. These things are beyond the limit of our imagination—we cannot imagine a thing that is not perceived by us, or does not resemble any such perceived thing, at least.

"And the ambiguous in word and meaning both is of five kinds: First, the ambiguity, because of quantity; when it is arguable whether the word is used in its general or particular meaning, for example, "kill the polytheists." Second, the ambiguity because of quality; whether the given order is obligatory or recommended, for example, "then marry such woman as seem good to you." Third, the ambiguity because of time, when it is arguable which of the two given orders is abrogated and which one abrogated it. Forth, ambiguity because of the place and the incident about which the verse was revealed, for example: *And it is not righteousness that you should enter the houses from their backs …* (2:189); and *Postponing* (of the sacred month) *is only an addition in unbelief* (9:37). It is difficult for a man who does not know the pre-Islamic Arabs' customs to understand these references. Fifth, ambiguity because of the conditions that make an action valid or void, for example, the conditions of prayer and marriage.

> "If you ponder on these divisions, you will see that all that the exegetes have written or said concerning the meaning of the 'ambiguous,' comes under one or the other of its headings and sub-headings; for example, the saying that ambiguous are the letter symbols, or Qatādah's opinion that the ambiguous is the abrogated verse, and the decisive is that which abrogated it, and the view of al-Aṣamm that there is unanimity about the interpretation of decisive verses, while there is no such unanimity about ambiguous ones.
>
> "Then all the ambiguous verses—whatever the reasons of their ambiguity—are of three categories: First, that which cannot be known by anyone in any way, like the time of resurrection, the appearance of the walker of the earth, and what that walker is, etc. Second, that which may be understood by man, like the uncommon words and complicated syntax. Third, that which may be comprehended by some of those who are firmly rooted in knowledge, and may remain hidden from others. It is this third category, about which the Prophet prayed for ʿAlī (may God be pleased with him), 'O God! give him the knowledge of religion and teach him the "interpretation" '; and prayed like this for Ibn ʿAbbās too."

This was the opinion of al-Rāghib; it is the most comprehensive of all such views; and combines many of the previously mentioned opinions.

Comment: First, it is against the obvious meaning of the verse to say that "ambiguousness" includes such cases as the uncommon words, complicated sentence-structure, generality and particularity of expressions and so on. The verse says that the ambiguous verses may be understood by referring them to the decisive ones. But the above-mentioned word problems cannot be solved by the decisive verses; there are other methods to solve them, like the grammar, dictionary and so on.

Moreover, the verse says that those who follow the ambiguous verses do so to misguide and to interpret them in their own ways. But nobody follows a general word without knowing its particulars, or an uncommon word without ascertaining from the dictionary what it means. If anyone did so, people would not listen to him, because it

would be against the universally accepted principles of language; and, as no one would listen to him, there could be no misleading and no misinterpreting.

Second, his final division of the ambiguous into three categories—that which can be understood by common man, that which cannot be understood, and that which can be understood by some and not by others—shows that he thinks that "interpretation" is a peculiarity of ambiguous verses. But we have already explained that "interpretation" is common to both ambiguous and decisive ones.

These were the opinions of the scholars about the meanings of the decisive and ambiguous verses. As you have seen, none of them is free from defects, nor does any conform with the clear purport of the verse. What one understands from the verse is this: An ambiguous verse is capable of more than one meaning, but the more apparent meaning is doubtful—not because of any difficulty of language or syntax (which can easily be removed with the help of well recognized literary and linguistic methods), but because it is against the semantic value of a decisive verse. Therefore, the actually intended meaning may be ascertained only with the help of that decisive verse.

Obviously, the apparent meaning of an ambiguous verse should be familiar to the common people and the simple minds would readily accept it and believe in it. Or if both meanings require some explanation, then the explanation leading to unintended meaning would be easier to understand for an uninitiated and unlearned man.

Look at the innovations and wrong sectarian beliefs; study the never ending schisms that have been shattering the Muslim community since the moment the Prophet left this world; try to find out the basic cause of their differences in matters of belief and law—and you will see that most of them have resulted from following the ambiguous verses and from interpreting them in a way not approved by God.

Every sect proves its beliefs from the Qur'anic verses: A party finds in it evidence that God is a body; a group proves from it that man has no free will concerning his actions, while another faction tries to show that man is totally independent of God in this respect; some people argue that the prophets committed mistakes and sins, and they quote the verses in their support; a circle says and proves it from the Qur'an, that God is so sublime that even "Divine Attributes" should not be

attributed to Him, while another faction says, and proves it too from the Qur'an, that God is just like His creatures and His attributes are separate from His Person. And so on and so forth. All this is a result of following the ambiguous verses without "returning" them to the relevant decisive ones.

Then look at a group saying that the laws of the shariah were ordained to serve as a path to reach the goal; if one finds a shorter route that leads to the same destination, it would be obligatory to walk on this new route, because the main thing is to reach there, through any easy way. Another one says that the rules of the shariah were promulgated to lead the man to perfection; there is no justification of burdening a man with them after he has reached that goal—therefore, one who has attained perfection is not obliged to observe the rules of the shariah. All the rules of the shariah, all the religious obligations, the complete penal code and all Islamic policies were established and enforced in the days of the Prophet, not a single item was neglected or kept in abeyance. Then, after his departure, the Muslim governments began suspending law after law. It was a continual process. Whenever a law or a penalty was discarded, those who were responsible for it argued: The religion was sent down for the good of the world and the good of the man; what we have adopted now, in place of the old outmoded law, is far more better for the people. Now, we have reached a stage where it is said: The only purpose of the shariah was to make the world a good place to live in; the world, nowadays, is not in a mood to accept the policies and punishments prescribed by Islam—it cannot digest it; the advanced civilization demands advanced and civilized laws—the laws of Islam are not good for this stage. Also, it is said: The religious rites were established so that they might purify the hearts and lead the minds to correct perception; those hearts that have been well-trained by the society and those spirits that are solely devoted to the service of mankind, do not need such purifications as ablution, obligatory bath, prayer and fast and so on.

Ponder over such views—and their number is beyond counting—and then study the words of God, *then as for those in whose hearts there is perversity, they follow the part of it which is ambiguous, seeking to mislead, and seeking to give it [their own] interpretation*, and you will have to admit that all those disorders and calamities that befell Islam

and the Muslims, have emanated from only one source—following the ambiguous verses seeking to give them one's own interpretation.

That is the reason—and God knows better—why the Qur'an has used such a tough language in this respect, most strictly forbidding the Muslims to follow the ambiguous verses seeking to mislead the people, and to interpret them according to one's own liking; and why it has condemned the tendency of distorting the signs and words of God, explaining them without true knowledge, and following the footsteps of Satan. It is the usual practice of the Qur'an to put greatest emphasis on condemning those matters that were likely to destroy any fundamental part of the religion, which, in its turn, could lead to ruination of the whole structure. Look, for example, at the severest admonitions against befriending the unbelievers; about the love of the near relatives of the Prophet; for staying of the wives of the Prophet inside their houses; against the interest; and concerning the unity in the word of religion etc.

What is the basic source of perversity of heart and of the tendency to mislead the people? It happens when one is inclined towards this material world, loves to remain on the earth for ever and succumbs to desires. How can the rust of perversity be removed? How can the door of misdirection be closed shut? The only way is to remember the Day of Reckoning, as God says: *[as for] those who go astray from the path of Allah, for them surely is a severe punishment because they forgot the Day of Reckoning* (38:26). That is why those who are firmly rooted in knowledge and who do not wish to interpret the Qur'an in a way their Lord does not approve, point to this fact at the end of their prayer: "Our Lord! Surely Thou art the Gatherer of men on a day about which there is no doubt; surely God fails not (His) promise."

2. "The Decisive Verses are the Basis of the Book." What does it mean?

A group says: The decisive verses are the basis of the Book—it means that they are the foundation of the Book upon which the edifice of religion, its principles and laws, are built up; and religion is only a collection of beliefs and deeds. Therefore, such verses are believed in and acted upon. So far as the ambiguous verses are concerned, they are believed in but not acted upon, because their meanings are not distinct

and their connotations are vague.

Comment: This meaning necessarily emanates from some of the opinions about the meaning of the decisive and ambiguous verses. If one believes that ambiguous is the verse whose interpretation is difficult to comprehend, or that its ambiguousness may be removed totally or partially with the help of reason, grammar, dictionary or other means used to solve a word-problem, then he would have to explain the "basis of the Book" in the way written above.

Others say that the sentence, "Decisive verses are the basis of the Book," refers to the fact that ambiguous verses return, that is, are referred, to them. But what is the meaning of this "return" or reference? Some people say: It means that ambiguous verses should be believed in, but when it comes to action, only the relevant decisive verse should be followed. For example, an abrogated verse should be believed in, but at the time of action it should be returned to its relevant decisive verse, that is, the one that abrogated it.

Comment: This explanation is not very different from the first one.

There is a third explanation and it is the correct one: The decisive verses are the basis of the Book, inasmuch as they clarify and explain the ambiguous ones and remove their ambiguousness.

As explained in the commentary, *al-umm* (translated here as "basis") literary means a thing to which another thing returns. The word "basis" or foundation does not convey the full sense of this word. The first explanation interprets it merely as the foundation; but it does not explain its full import. The word *al-umm* points to a special kind of return—as a part returns to its whole, or a branch returns to its roots; the thing that returns is derived from, and is a part of, the thing to which it returns. This word, therefore, indicates that ambiguous verses have such meanings that branch out from, and return to, the decisive ones. And that is why the decisive ones explain and clarify the ambiguous ones.

Moreover, the ambiguous is given this name because it is capable of more than one meaning; and not because it has an "interpretation" because interpretation is found in decisive verses also; the Qur'anic verses explain each other, and it is only decisive verses that can clarify the ambiguous ones. Let us repeat the example of the verse: *Looking to their Lord* (75:23); it is ambiguous; but when it is returned to the words

of God: *nothing is like a likeness of Him* (42:11), and: *Visions comprehend Him not* (6:103), it becomes clear that "looking at" in this phrase means something different from the optical vision connected with the eyes.

Likewise, God has said: *The [Prophet's] heart belied not what he saw. What! do you then dispute with him as to what he saw? … Certainly he saw of the greatest signs of his Lord* (53:11-18). The verse proves that the heart has a sight of its own. And this vision of heart is something different from "thinking" and "consideration." Because the thought and consideration is a process that consists of a subject and a predicate; while vision is a single action, it looks at the object without joining it to any subject or predicate. Therefore, this vision of heart is neither a material nor a mental consideration; it is the orientation of heart towards the object.

The same is the case with all other ambiguous verses.

3. The Meaning of *al-Taʾwīl* (Interpretation)

According to some exegetes *al-taʾwīl* (interpretation) is synonymous for exegesis, explanation or meaning of the sentence. Meanings of some parts of the Qur'an are certainly known to the people. Accordingly, the interpretation mentioned in the verse (*seeking to give it their own interpretation, but none knows its interpretation except Allah*) must be restricted to the meaning of the ambiguous verses. Therefore, they say that none can know, in any way, the meaning of an ambiguous verse, except God—or except God and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge.

Another group says that "interpretation" is the meaning that is against the apparent meaning of the word. This explanation has become so wide spread that, at present, it has become the real meaning of *al-taʾwīl,* while originally this word meant "to return" or "the returning place." Anyhow, this explanation is popular among the later exegetes, while the explanation mentioned first was familiar to the ancients, whether they believed that its knowledge was restricted to God only, or said that they too, who were firmly rooted in knowledge, knew it; for example, it has been narrated from Ibn ʿAbbās that he used to say: "I am one of those who are firmly rooted in knowledge and I know its interpretation."

A third group says: "Interpretation" is that meaning of the verse

which is not known except to God (or to God and the ones firmly rooted in knowledge), and which is against the apparent meaning of the word. In other words, an ambiguous verse has many meanings—one behind the other; some meanings are showing themselves just behind the words, and may be perceived by one and all; others are far behind and none knows them except God (or except God and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge).

There is, within this group, a difference of opinion as to how those various meanings are related to the word. It is sure that all of them are not on the same level; otherwise, it would mean that one word is used in more than one meaning at the same time, and that is not permissible in language (as has been explained in the Fundamentals of Jurisprudence). Therefore, those meanings must be taken consecutively. Now comes the difference: Some say that one meaning is the real one; the second is its concomitant; the third is the second's concomitant and so on. Others say that the meanings are all ranked one behind the other, as an esoteric meaning is hidden behind a manifest one. When a man speaks a word, he intends it to convey its familiar meaning, and with the same intention he aims at its esoteric meaning. You say: Give me water to drink. You ask only for drink; but that very word is also a demand to satiate your thirst; and this in its turn is a call to satisfy a need of life, and then a determination to acquire the perfection of existence. Note that you had not given four orders; you only told him to give you water to drink, but this one demand contained in itself all the unspoken but intended demands—one inside the other.

There is a fourth explanation: Interpretation is not a sort of a meaning intended from the word. It is a thing really existing outside imagination, upon which the talk is based. If the speech is of imperative mood—enjoining or forbidding—then its interpretation is that reason for which the said commandment is given. There is an order: Establish prayer. Its interpretation is that spiritual perfection which illuminates the soul of the one who prays, and prevents him from evil and sin. If the speech is an information—of a past event—then that event itself is its interpretation. Look, for example, at the verses narrating the stories of the prophets and their peoples. And if it is an information of a present or future happening, then it is of two kinds: (i) If the subject may be perceived by one of the senses or comprehended by mind, then

its interpretation is the same subject as it exists or shall exist in reality: For example, God says: *and among you are those who hearken for their sake* (9:47); and: *The Romans are vanquished, in a near land, and they, after being vanquished, shall overcome within a few years* (30:2-4). (ii) If it is a future event of unseen that cannot be perceived by worldly perceptions, nor can it be comprehended by our minds, like the affairs of the Day of Resurrection, the time of its happening, the raising of the dead and their gathering together, the questioning, the reckoning, the flying of the books of deeds and so on, and like the reality of the Divine Attributes and Actions. (These latter are above the reach of time and beyond the limit of minds), then too their interpretation is the same reality that exists or shall exist outside imagination.

There is a big difference between the verses that describe these last-mentioned realities (attributes and actions of God and the affairs related to the Day of Resurrection) and those describing other subjects. It is possible to know the interpretation of the verses that describe other subjects; but so far as the verses describing the Divine Attributes etc., are concerned, none knows their interpretation except God; although those who are firmly rooted in knowledge may be given this knowledge by God to the extent of their mental capacities and spiritual perfection. Still, the reality, that is, the full and final interpretation, is not given to any creature at all.

These are the four main opinions concerning the meaning of "interpretation." There are some other views also; they are, in fact, various branches of the first opinion although those who expressed them have not acknowledged this fact:

(i) Exegesis is more general than interpretation. Exegesis is mostly used for explanation of words; interpretation is mostly used for explanation of the meanings and sentences. The term, "interpretation" is generally used only for the Divine Books; while exegesis is used for other books too.

(ii) Exegesis is explanation of a word that has only one meaning; interpretation is choosing, with help of some rules and reason, one meaning out of several possible ones.

(iii) Exegesis shows the definite meaning of the word; interpretation chooses one among many possible meanings. (It is not very different from the second opinion)

(iv) Exegesis shows the reason of the meaning; interpretation explains the reality of the meaning. For example, look at the verse: *Most surely your Lord is on watch* (89:14). Its exegesis shall be as follows: *al-Mirṣād* (watching place) is on paradigm of *al-mifʿāl* from the verb *raṣada; yarṣudu* (he watched; he is watching). And its interpretation is the warning against slackening in matters of the shariah and thinking lightly of the commandments of God.

(v) Exegesis is a description of the clear meaning of a word; interpretation is the explanation of its difficult meaning.

(vi) Exegesis is concerned with tradition and narration; interpretation is related to reason.

(vii) Exegesis is limited to following and listening (what the ancients said); interpretation is concerned with inference and reason.

These seven are in fact various facets of the first opinion; and all objections levelled against that are valid about these too. Anyhow, one cannot rely on any of the four opinions or their branches.

One defect is common to all: They presume that "interpretation" is the meaning of the verse, or that it is the happening or cause to which the verse refers. But it has been explained in the Commentary that "interpretation" is not the meaning of a verse—it does not matter whether the meaning is the apparent one or is against it. Also, it has been clarified therein that although interpretation is a real event or fact, but not every event—it is that fact with which the word has the same relation as a proverb has with its purpose; or as an exterior has with its interior.

The detailed comments on the four opinions (mentioned above) are as follows:

About the first opinion: One who believes it, must also believe that at least some of the Qur'anic verses are unintelligible; that its "interpretation," that is, exegesis cannot be understood from its words. But there is no such verse in the Qur'an; the Qur'an clearly says that it has been revealed so that an average mind may easily understand it.

A man having this opinion cannot avoid this difficulty except by saying that the only ambiguous verses are the letter-symbols at the beginning of some chapters, as their meanings are not known to the people. But, there is no proof that only the letter-symbols are "ambiguous"; and just because *al-taʾwīl* means to return and *al-tafsīr* (exegesis)

also has a shade of this meaning, it does not follow that both are synonymous. A mother is the returning place for her children, but she is not their "interpretation"; a principal is the returning place of his dependents, but he is not their "interpretation." Moreover, according to the verse, one of the characteristics of the ambiguous verses is that perverted persons follow them to mislead the people. But who has ever been misled by letter-symbols? Most of the misguidance in Muslim community has occurred because of following those verses that describe the attributes of God and other such things.

About the second opinion: It says that there are verses in the Qur'an whose intended import is against their apparent meanings, and those apparent meanings cause misguidance in religion as they are against the decisive verses. This statement boils down to this: The verses of the Qur'an are contradictory to each other and that contradiction cannot be removed unless some verses are deprived of their open meanings and given some such connotations that, in normal course, would not be understood from them.

This, in its turn, would invalidate the argument contained in the words of God: *Do they not then meditate on the Qur'an? And if it were from any other than Allah, they would have found in it many a discrepancy* (4:82).

If the discrepancy between two verses can be removed only by saying that one or both do not mean what their words apparently say; that they have an interpretation (that is, a meaning against the apparent one) that is not known to anyone other than God, then the verse 4:82, written above, cannot prove that the Qur'an is from God. One can easily remove contradiction and discrepancy from any literary or academic work of any author, if one were to change the apparent meanings of contradictory statements and give them new connotations unknown to any linguist. But such removal of contradiction would not prove that work as a Divine revelation. The fact is that every speech—even one that is admittedly false or is just a jumble of words—can be presented as a true fact or a serious discourse if its words were given some hitherto unknown meanings against their clear connotations. But such an absence of discrepancy would not mean that the speech was from a Speaker Who is above the changes, Whose decrees and statements do not contradict each other, Who is not liable to forgetfulness and error,

Who is All-perfect by Himself and has not acquired perfection through trial and error, experience and passage of time.

The verse 4:82, proves that the Qur'an is understandable to common minds and may be pondered and meditated upon; that no verse of it has a meaning that is against the clear dictate of Arabic language; in short, it does not contain puzzles and riddles.

About the third opinion: No one who has meditated on the Qur'an would deny that the Qur'anic verses have various consecutive connotations—one behind the other. But all those connotations are, in fact, various levels of the meanings of the words—and especially so if we say that they are concomitants of the first meaning. And their understandability varies according to the intelligence levels of the readers. But this idea has no resemblance with *al-taʾwīl* (interpretation). Remember what God has said about the "interpretation" of the Qur'an that none knows it except God. And note the fact that one does not need piety and spiritual purity to understand a complicated or deep philosophical discourse; what one requires is a sharp intelligence. Then you will realize that it would be inappropriate to say that only God knew the interpretation (in the meaning given in this opinion) of the Qur'an. (It does not mean that piety and spiritual purity do not help in comprehension of Divine knowledge and realities; but they are not the main foundation of this comprehension. This place is reserved for intelligence and scholarship.)

About the fourth opinion: He is right when he says that *al-taʾwīl* (interpretation) is not restricted to the ambiguous verses, it is found in the whole Qur'an. Also, he is right in saying that interpretation is not the meaning of the word; it is a real fact on which the speech is based. But he is wrong when he says that every fact, referred to by the verse, is its interpretation, and when he says, for example, that the past events or the future happenings are the interpretations of the relevant verses. Again, he is wrong in thinking that only the verses describing the Divine Attributes and the events of the Day of Resurrection are ambiguous. Why do we say that he is wrong in these assumptions? The answer is as follows:

What is the meaning of the words: "and seeking to give it (their own) interpretation, but none knows its interpretation except God"? Do the pronoun "it" and "its" refer to "the Book"? In other words, does

the verse say that none knows the interpretation of the whole Book except God? If the interpretation means real events and causes mentioned in the verses, then the above statement would not be correct, because interpretations (in the meaning just described) of a great many verses are known to many other than God and other than those who are firmly rooted in knowledge; in fact, it may be known to even those in whose hearts there is perversity—such are the verses narrating the stories of the past nations and the current events, and even the verses dealing with laws and ethics. Everyone can acquire the knowledge of these things, and no one can fail to understand their interpretation (in this meaning).

Or, do the pronouns, "it" and "its" refer to "the part of the Book that is ambiguous"? If so, then it will be correct to restrict the knowledge of its interpretation to God (or to God and those firmly rooted in knowledge). And then it would be the import of the verse that none, except God (and those firmly rooted in knowledge) should seek to interpret the ambiguous verses; otherwise, the people would be misled and misguided.

But it would be wrong in this case to say that only the verses describing the attributes and actions of God, and those connected with the Day of Judgement were ambiguous. Misguidance is caused by misinterpretation of other types of verses too; for example, the verses related to the shariah and the stories of the prophets and their nations. It has been claimed by a group that the main purpose of the law is to reform and develop the society; if the good of the society depends on a law other than the one ordained by religion, or if that ordained law is no longer suitable for this enlightened era, a new law should be adopted and the religious command should be discarded. Likewise, it has been claimed that the miracles attributed by the Qur'an to the prophets were not supernatural events; they were normal occurrences, which the Qur'an narrated in a way as to put on them a halo of mystery; as a result of this dramatic style, it succeeded in attracting the attention of the audience and to make them submit to what they thought to be a super-power, above all powers. Such misleading explanations and interpretations are found in their hundreds in all the sects that have deviated from true Islam. And all are the result of interpreting the Qur'an according to one's own liking, seeking to mislead the people. Therefore, it is wrong

to say that only those verses are ambiguous which describe the Divine Attributes and the affairs of the Day of Resurrection.

Now, it should be clear that the meaning of "interpretation" given by us in the commentary is the only true one:

Interpretation is that reality to which a verse refers; it is found in all verses, the decisive and the ambiguous alike; it is not a sort of a meaning of the word; it is a real fact that is too sublime for words; God has dressed them with words so as to bring them a bit nearer to our minds; in this respect they are like proverbs that are used to create a picture in the mind and thus help the hearer to clearly grasp the intended idea. That is why God has said: *[I swear] by the Book that makes manifest [the truth]*; *surely We have made it an Arabic Qur'an, so that you may understand. And surely it is in the original of the Book with Us, truly elevated, full of wisdom* (43:2-4). And this thing has been explicitly and implicitly mentioned in several Qur'anic verses.

Moreover, you have seen in the commentary that whenever the Qur'an uses the word, "interpretation" (and it has been used seventeen times), it intends this very meaning, described by us.

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4. Does Anyone, Other than God, Know the "Interpretation" of the Qur'an?

This issue too has caused sharp controversy among the exegetes. The main reason of the controversy is the meaning of "and," in the sentence, "and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: We believe in it, it is all from our Lord." Is it a conjunctive? Or, has it been used only to begin a new sentence?

Some early exegetes, some Shāfiʿites and most of the Shīʿites believe that it is a conjunctive; that the verse says that those too who are firmly rooted in knowledge know the interpretation of the ambiguous verses of the Qur'an.

Most of the early exegetes and the Ḥanafites believe that with this "and" a new sentence begins; that none knows the interpretation of the ambiguous except God, Who has kept this knowledge to Himself. Both groups bring in their support a lot of academic explanations and traditions; the polemics goes on, arguments are put forward, are refuted by the opposite group, then the refutations in their turn are refuted; thus it goes on and on.

Both sides suffer from confusion about the issue to be decided. They have confused the interpretation of the Qur'an with returning the ambiguous verse to the decisive. Therefore, it will be a waste of time and space to quote here their arguments and counter-arguments. So far as the traditions are concerned they are against the clear meaning of the Qur'an:

(1) Let us look, to begin with, at the traditions that say that those who are firmly rooted in knowledge know the interpretation. These traditions use "interpretation" as synonymous for the "intended meaning of the ambiguous"; but, as mentioned repeatedly, interpretation of the Qur'an is something else.

It has been narrated through the Sunnī chains that the Prophet prayed for Ibn ʿAbbās: "O God! give him knowledge of the religion and teach him the interpretation." And Ibn ʿAbbās is reported as saying: "I am among those who are firmly rooted in knowledge and I know its interpretation." Also he said: "The decisive are the verses that abrogated and the ambiguous are the abrogated ones." All these traditions put together give an impression that the decisive verse is the interpretation of the ambiguous one.

But we have already explained that this verse is not concerned with this sort of interpretation.

(2) Now we come to those traditions that show that knowledge of the interpretation of the ambiguous verses is restricted to God:

(a) Ibn ʿAbbās is reported to recite the verse in this way: "and none knows its interpretation except God, and say those who are firmly rooted in knowledge: *We believe in it …*" The same recitation is ascribed to Ubay b. Kaʿb. Likewise, Ibn Masʿūd is reported to recite: "And its interpretation is not except with God. And those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: 'We believe in it …' "

But such traditions can prove nothing: First, because such uncommon recitations are of no value at all; secondly, utmost that can be shown from them is that this verse does not prove that those who are firmly rooted in knowledge know the interpretation; but there is a world of difference between not proving that Zayd exists and proving that he does not exist.

(b) It is narrated by al-Ṭabarānī from Abū Mālik al-Ashʿarī that he heard the Messenger of God saying: "I am not afraid for my *ummah*

but from three things: that their wealth would increase, and they would envy each other and kill each other; and that the Book would be opened for them, and the believer would take it seeking to interpret it, *and none knows its interpretation except Allah; and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: We believe in it, it is all from our Lord; and none do mind except those having understanding;* and that their knowledge would increase and they would waste and neglect it." (*al-Durr al-manthūr*)

This tradition—if we accept that it has any relation with the subject matter—would only show that common believers did not know the interpretation; but it could not be proved from it that those too who were firmly rooted in knowledge did not have its knowledge. And the controversy is about this latter group; it is not about general believers.

(c) Some people offer those traditions as their proof which say that the decisive verses should be followed and ambiguous ones should only be believed in.

But such traditions have no relevance to the issue under dispute.

(d) al-Ālūsī has quoted in his *al-Tafsīr, al-Marfūʿ*[1] tradition through Ibn Jarīr from Ibn ʿAbbās that he said: "The Qur'an has been revealed on four words: The lawful, and the prohibited (none is excused from acquiring its knowledge); and the explanation (it is done by the scholars); and the ambiguous, none knows it except God, and the one who claims to know it (except God) is a liar."

Let us have a cursory glance at this tradition: First, some names from the chain of its narrators are omitted. Secondly, it is against the previously mentioned traditions that say that the Prophet prayed for him to be given the knowledge of interpretation, and against his own claim that he had this knowledge. Thirdly, it is against the clear import of the Qur'an that interpretation is something other than the meaning of the ambiguous.

What is, then, the reply to the question asked in the beginning? Does anyone, other than God, know the interpretation of the Qur'an? The answer is: Yes, the Qur'an proves the possibility of the knowledge of its interpretation to someone other than God; although this verse does not prove it.

Let us explain the second statement first. The context shows the

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1 *al-Marfūʿ* is a tradition in which a narrator mentions the name/s of person/s from whom he narrates, but a later narrator omits his/their name/s. (Trans.)

theme of this verse: It wants to say that the Book is divided in two categories—the decisive and the ambiguous—and also the people are of two types: there is a group which, because of perversity of hearts, seeks to follow the ambiguous verses; and there is another group that is firmly rooted in knowledge and therefore follows the decisive verses and believes in the ambiguous ones. It is clear, in this light, that the phrase, "those who are firmly rooted in knowledge," is used here primarily to describe their good faith and behavior *vis-a-vis* the Qur'an, and to extol their virtue in contrast to those in whose hearts there is perversity. The sentence aims at nothing else. And there is no reason, so far as this verse is concerned, to join those who are firmly rooted in knowledge, with God, in knowledge of the Book's interpretation. The arguments put forward in this respect are defective, as we have shown above.

In short, the restriction, "none knows its interpretation except God," remains valid, without any opposing or qualifying clause—there is no conjunction, exception or qualification in this absolute statement. Therefore, so far as this verse is concerned, the knowledge of the Qur'an's interpretation is reserved for God.

Nevertheless, there may be other proofs to show that someone, other than God, may be knowing this interpretation. There are in the Qur'an instances in which an absolute restriction of one verse has been qualified by another. Take the example of the knowledge of the unseen. The Qur'an has declared in many verses that it is confined to God: *Say: No one in the heavens and the earth knows the unseen but Allah* (27:65); *Say: The unseen is only for Allah* (10:20); *And with Him are the keys of the unseen—none knows them but He* (6:59).

And after all these restricting statements, comes the following verse: *The Knower of the unseen! so He does not reveal His secrets to any, except to him whom He chooses of an apostle* (72:26-27). This verse clearly says that some persons other than God, that is, the chosen apostles, are given the knowledge of the unseen.

Now time has come to discuss the first statement: Other verses of the Qur'an prove that it is possible for someone, other than God, to have the knowledge of the Qur'an's interpretation:

As repeatedly explained, interpretation is a real fact existing outside imagination, and the meaning of the verse has the same relation with

it as a proverb has with its purpose and purport. Interpretation is not the meaning of the verse; rather it transpires through that meaning—a special sort of transpiration. There is a proverb in Arabic used when someone intends to do a work but has already destroyed its means: "In summer you spoiled the milk." When it is used, its literal meaning (a woman's spoiling the milk in summer) does not fit the occasion, yet it presents a clear picture before the eyes of the audience, and that picture leads to the purpose of the talk.

The same is the case of the interpretation. There is a spiritual reality which is the main objective of ordaining a law, or basic aim of describing a Divine Attribute; there is an actual significance to which a Qur'anic story refers. That spiritual reality or actual significance is not seen in the words or the meaning of the verse—that order, prohibition, explanation, or narration does not mention that spiritual reality or actual significance in its words. But it transpires from that order and so on, because the order is founded it. We may as well say that the order or story and so on, points to that spiritual reality or significance. A man tells his servant: "Give me water to drink." This order emanates from the natural instinct of man to perfect his existence. It is this basic reality that demands preservation of self; this in its turn arranges to replace what is used up in the body; this requires replenishment with food and drink; this need is announced through hunger and thirst. The latter demands satiation, which in its turn causes the man to give that order to his servant. The interpretation of the said order, therefore, is the natural instinct of man to perfect his existence. If this reality, this natural instinct, changes for any reason, the order, "Give me water," also would change.

Likewise, various societies have some recognized ethical and social norms based on what they think to be good or evil. This in its turn, depends on a set of customs and traditions that are firmly settled in the doer's mind, through heredity and environment. This compound cause is the interpretation of his action and inaction. If those social factors change for any reason, his action and inaction will also change.

A subject—whether it is an order, a story or any other topic—that has an interpretation will certainly change if that interpretation changes. Now ponder on the words of God: *then as for those in whose hearts there is perversity, they follow the part of it which is ambiguous,*

seeking to mislead, and seeking to give it [their own] interpretation, but none knows its interpretation except Allah. Note that they have been condemned because they try to give that verse their own interpretation which is not the real one; and this misinterpretation causes misguidance and makes people go astray.

Had they followed its true interpretation then it could not be condemned. They would have followed truth and reality, it would have led them to the relevant decisive verses, and it would have been a praiseworthy act.

Now it is clear that the interpretations of the Qur'an are the facts actually existing outside imagination; the Qur'anic verses its spiritual realities, laws and stories—are based upon them; if supposedly any of those facts changes for any reason, the relevant verses would also surely change.

This fits perfectly the purport of the verse: *[We swear] by the Book that makes manifest [the truth], surely We have made it an Arabic Qur'an so that you may understand. And surely it is in the original of the Book with Us, truly elevated, full of wisdom* (43:2-4). These verses show that the Qur'an, when it was with God, was too elevated to be comprehended by human understanding; too precise and firm to admit any break or fragmentation. But God, because of His mercy, made it into a Book to be recited, and clothed it with Arabic language, so that people may understand what they could not comprehend as long as it was in the original, or basis, of the Book. This original or basis of the Book has been mentioned in these verses: *Allah effaces what He pleases and establishes [likewise], and with Him is the basis of the Book* (13:39); *Nay! it is a glorious Qur'an, in a guarded tablet* (85:21-22).

And in a general way the following verse also proves it:

[This is] a Book, whose verses were confirmed [made decisive], then they were divided, from one Wise, All-aware (11:1). The confirmation and decisiveness refers to its condition when it was with God without any fragmentation or break, and the division refers to that state when it was made into chapters and verses and was revealed to the Prophet.

This last condition (division), which is based on the first (confirmation), is mentioned in the verse: *And a Qur'an which We revealed in portions so that you may read it to the people by slow degrees, and We sent it down [that is, revealed it] in portions* (17:106). It is clear that the

Qur'an, in its original, was undivided, then it was made into portions and sent down piecemeal and revealed gradually.

The above statement does not mean that the whole Qur'an, when it was with God, was arranged in chapters and verses, a sort of a book written and bound, and then it was divided into pieces and sent to the Prophet a little bit at a time, so that he might read to the people by slow degrees, as a teacher divides a book in portions and teaches the student every day a portion according to his mental capacity. There is a basic difference between revealing the Qur'an to the Prophet in portions and teaching a student a book, piece by piece. The verses were revealed according to the events that had a bearing on their revelation. But there is no such thing in teaching of a student. Various pieces that are to be taught to a student may be, and are, gathered and put together in a book form beforehand; then the teacher teaches a piece or a portion every day, as he thinks fit. But it cannot be said about many Qur'anic verses, such as the following: *so forgive them and pass over them* (5:13); *fight those of the unbelievers who are near to you* (9:123); *Allah has surely heard the plea of her who pleads with you about her husband and complains to Allah* (58:1); *Take alms out of their wealth, you would cleanse them and purify them thereby* (9:103); there are numerous such verses. It is not possible to ignore the reasons and occasions that resulted in their revelation; one cannot arbitrarily say that this or that verse was revealed in the earlier or later days of the Call, discarding the reasons of its revelation. Therefore, it cannot be said that the Qur'an was with God in chapters and verses, as we know, it today.

And it shows that the "Qur'an" mentioned in the verse, "And a Qur'an which We revealed in portions," refers to a Qur'an other than this one which is made of chapters and verses.

What one understands from the above verses, is that there is something, beyond this Qur'an which is read and understood by us. And that "something" has the same relation with this Qur'an as the spirit has with the body, or as the significance of a proverb has with that proverb. It is that spirit of this Qur'an which is called by God as: *the confirmed* (or wise) *Book* (10:1). The Qur'anic teachings and meanings depend upon it. That spirit of the Qur'an is not made of words or words' meanings.

The above-mentioned characteristics of the spirit of the Qur'an are the same as those of the "interpretation" of the Qur'an. The above

discourse makes it even clearer; and makes us realize why it is said that the interpretation of the Qur'an cannot be even touched by common minds and unclean spirits.

Then God says: *Most surely it is an honored Qur'an, in a Book that is hidden; none do touch it save the purified ones* (56:77-79). These verses clearly say that the purified servants of God do touch the honored Book which is hidden and protected from any change; minds cannot reach it, because that also would be a sort of a change. Anyhow, the purified ones do touch it—the only meaning of the words—"touch" in this context is that they know it and understand it. Also, it is known that this hidden Book is the same "basis of the Book" and "original of the Book" mentioned in the verses: *Allah effaces what He pleases and establishes [likewise], and with Him is the basis of the Book* (13:39); *and surely it is in the original of the Book with Us, truly elevated, full of wisdom* (43:4).

Those are the people whose heart are purified; and this purification emanates from none other than God, because He has attributed this purifying to Himself: *Allah only desires to keep away the uncleanliness from you, O People of the House! and to purify you a [thorough] purifying* (33:33); *… but He intends to purify you* (5:6). Wherever in the Qur'an, the spiritual purification is mentioned God has attributed it to Himself or to His permission. What is this purity? It is removal of impurity and uncleanliness from the heart. What is meant by "heart" in this context? It is the means of perception, understanding and will. The purity of heart, then, is the purity of the soul in knowledge and belief as well as in will. Thus, the heart remains firm in its true beliefs, without any doubt or confusion; and this firmness makes it steadfast in following and acting upon that true belief and knowledge, obeying the commandments of God, without deviating to the path of desire, without breaking the covenant of knowledge. Such a man is said to be firmly rooted in knowledge. Because the same are the characteristics, described by God, of those who are firmly rooted in knowledge. God has praised them that they are rightly guided and steadfastly firm on what they know; that there is no perversity in their hearts and they do not seek to mislead the people. These are the same characteristics as of the purified ones. It means that the purified ones are firmly rooted in knowledge.

But there is a fine distinction that should not be overlooked. What has been proved above is this: The purified ones know the interpretation of the Qur'an; and it is a concomitant of their purity that they are also firmly rooted in knowledge—because that purification is attributed to God Who cannot fail in what He intends.

But it does not mean that the knowledge of the Qur'anic interpretation is given to them because of their being firmly rooted in knowledge. In other words, the firmly rooted knowledge is not the cause of their knowledge of the Qur'anic interpretation, because the verse does not prove it; rather it may be inferred from its context that they were not conversant with that interpretation: "(they) say: 'We believe in it, it is all from our Lord'." Moreover, God has praised some of the people of the Book that they were firmly rooted in knowledge, and has extolled them for their acceptance of true faith and good deeds; and still it does not show that they knew the interpretation of the Book. The relevant verse is as follows: *But those firmly rooted in knowledge among them as well as the believers believe in what has been sent down to you and what has been sent down before you …* (4:162).

Also, it should be noted that the verse: *None do touch it save the purified ones* (56:79), proves only that the purified ones "touch" the hidden Book; in other words, they know the interpretation of the Qur'an to a certain extent. But it does not say that they have comprehensive knowledge of its complete interpretation, or that they are not unacquainted of any portion of its interpretation at any time. The verse is silent on this matter. If it is to be proved, some other evidence should be brought for it.

5. Why the Book Contains the Ambiguous Verses

One of the objections levelled against the Qur'an is the one based on the presence of the ambiguous verses in it. They say: The Muslims claim that whatever the mankind would need for its guidance up to the Day of Resurrection is in the Qur'an; that it is a decisive word that distinguishes between truth and falsehood. And then we see that every group, among the innumerable Muslim sects, relies on the Qur'an to prove the correctness of its beliefs and actions. It would not have been possible if there were no ambiguity in its verses. Had this Book been made clear and kept free from this maze of ambiguous verses, it would

have served its purpose in a better way, and there would not have been any chance of controversy and perversity.

The Muslims have variously replied to this objection; some of the replies are patently absurd and foolish. For example:

"The presence of ambiguous verses makes it hard to get to the truth, and entails intense search and research. This makes the true believer eligible to better and greater reward!"

"Had it clearly supported a certain sect, all other sects would have left it unread and unstudied. It is because of the ambiguous verses that all of them look into, and ponder on it; and thus there remains a possibility that they would see the right path and follow it."

"The ambiguous verses have made it necessary to seek support of one's views from rational arguments. Thus, these verses take the Muslims out of the darkness of blind following into the light of contemplation and research."

"The presence of such verses compelled the Muslims to argue about their various interpretations; and this is in its turn led them to master various branches of knowledge, like language, conjugation, syntax, and fundamentals of jurisprudence!"

Such replies do not merit any comment. There are three other replies which we append below with our comments:

First: The Qur'an contains ambiguous verses, so that the hearts may be purified by believing in them. Had all the verses been distinct, decisive and clear—about which nobody could have any doubt—believing in them would have not been a meaningful and significant thing; it would have not entailed surrender to the words of God and submission to His apostles.

Comment: Submission is the reaction of a weaker person in front of a stronger force. A man surrenders before a thing, the greatness of which he comprehends; or before a thing that is beyond his comprehension, and with whose greatness he is completely overwhelmed; like the power, greatness and other Attributes of God—when man tries to understand them, he feels stunned and bewildered.

But why should he submit to a thing which, although beyond his comprehension, seems to him within his grasp? If a man mistakenly believes that he knows the interpretation of an ambiguous verse (although, in fact he does not know it), he will never submit himself

to it nor will he surrender before its greatness.

Second: Ambiguous verses were revealed to motivate the minds to meditate and research. Had all the verses been distinct there would not have been any need for mental exercise and the power of understanding would have withered away. And understanding is the most precious element of human life; it must be nourished and developed for the sake of human perfection.

Comment: God has ordered the man to meditate and ponder on the signs found in the universe and in the man himself—this exhortation is sometimes phrased in general terms and often with reference to particular subjects, like the creation of the heavens, the earth, the mountains, the trees, the animals and the human beings; the difference in colors and languages of mankind etc. He has called him to think and meditate, to walk in the earth and take lesson from the previous nations' affairs. He has forcefully urged them to apply the minds to the wonders of the world and to think hard. And He has extolled knowledge and cognition in the best terms.

Was not all this enough for sharpening the mind and intensifying the intelligence? Was there any further need of sending down ambiguous verses—to trap the minds and ensnare the intellect?

Third: The prophets were sent to all the people—the average ones and the above average, the intelligent and the dull, the learned and the ignorant. Some realities and ideas cannot be explained in plain language. Such subjects must necessarily be described in a language clothed with allegory and metaphor. Only the learned, intelligent and the above average persons will be able to understand it; common people must necessarily be told to believe in it and leave the matter to God.

Comment: The Book, according to the verse under discussion, contains some ambiguous verses, and some decisive ones which are the basis of the Book, and which do explain the ambiguous verses when they are returned to them (decisive ones). In other words, the ambiguous verses do not contain any ideas other than those which may be clarified by the decisive ones. And it leaves the question still unanswered: What is the use of the ambiguous verses when all their meanings are clearly described by the decisive ones?

The exegete, who wrote this reply, seems a bit confused. He has divided the meanings of the Qur'an into two mutually exclusive groups:

Meanings that may be understood by one and all (and they are the meanings of the decisive verses), and those that cannot be understood except by some special people (and they are the connotations of the ambiguous ones). If we accept this classification, then the ambiguous verses shall not be returned to the decisive ones—but it is against the clear declarations of the Qur'an that its verses explain each other.

If no reply is free from defect, then what is the answer to the question given in the beginning?

The fact is that the presence of ambiguous verses is necessary in the Qur'an, and it has resulted from the existence of the interpretation. When we use the word, "interpretation," we refer to its true connotation explained under the third heading. Various ambiguous verses, when compared with each other, lead to the said interpretation.

To understand this statement, one should first ponder on the style of the Qur'an, the factors on which the Divine teachings are based, and the ultimate aim of the revelation. We may describe it as following:

God has said that there is an interpretation for His Book. All the Qur'anic realities, laws and teachings move around that interpretation. But the said interpretation is a sublime reality; minds cannot grasp it; intelligence cannot reach it; and imagination cannot perceive it. The only exception is of those purified souls from whom God has removed every impurity; only they can touch it.

It is the ultimate that God demands from human beings—that they should answer His call to acquire the real knowledge of His Book. This Book has the explanation of everything, and the key to its secrets is the Divine Purification. God says: *Allah does not desire to put on you any difficulty, but He wishes to purify you* (5:7). In other words, the ultimate aim of ordination of the shariah is the said Divine Purification.

This human perfection, like other ideals, is not attained except by a few special persons, although the Call is addressed to all. The religious training creates purity in various degrees in various people. Some reach its highest point, some to various points in between. It is like the piety (that is, fear of God) to which Islam invites: … *fear Allah as is due to Him* … (3:102). But only a handful of believers acquire perfect piety; others remain behind them, and a third band behind the second, and so on. It happens because people differ in their aptitudes and understanding.

The same is the case with social norms. The society expects every member to reach the zenith of all desirable characteristics, like knowledge, industry, riches, comfort and so on—but only a few attain this goal; others remain behind at various points in the way, because of difference in their abilities.

Although society never remains without some individuals who attain the highest possible rank in all perfections, not everyone reaches there.

The Qur'an declares that the only way by which a man can reach this destination is to know himself, by acquiring true knowledge and acting upon it. On the side of knowledge, he should be taught the realities about his beginning and end as well as about what is between these two points; then he may truly know himself, in the context of all relevant realities. On the side of action, he should be made to follow the social rules—the rules that would make him live a good social life, and would not hinder him from the pursuit of knowledge and contemplation; then he should be told to perform rites of Divine Worship—these rites, if performed regularly, draw the soul towards the Creator, help the heart in concentrating on one's beginning and end, and bring it nearer to the spiritual perfection and purity, keeping it clean from the filth and dirt of materialism.

First study the verse: *To Him do ascend the good words; and the good deed lifts them up* (35:10). Then add to it the following, among other such verses: *Allah does not desire to put on you any difficulty, but He wishes to purify you and that He may complete His favor on you …* (5:7); *O you who believe! take care of your souls; he who errs cannot hurt you when you are on the right way* (5:105); *Allah will exalt those of you who believe and those who are given knowledge, in high degrees* (58:11).

Then you will clearly see what was the aim of God in sending down the religion and guiding the man to it, and appreciate the way He used for this guidance.

Through all this, we reach to an important conclusion:

The social laws of Islam are the stepping stones for the rites of Divine Worship, which in their turn lead the man to the knowledge of God and of His Signs. Even a minor infringement of, and change or alteration in, these social laws would disturb and deflect the commandments concerning Divine Worship; and that in its turn would

disrupt the man's knowledge of God.

It is a clear conclusion; and the experience shows its truth. If you ponder on the manner in which corruption stealthily crept into Islamic affairs, and find out how it began and where it has reached, you will see that it began with social laws, then surreptitiously it contaminated the rites of worship and ended with the rejection of the spiritual realities and man's knowledge of God.

Also, it was described earlier that the misleading began with following the ambiguous verses, seeking to interpret them according to the people's own liking.

Religious guidance is based on two pillars: Prohibition of blind following, and progress of knowledge among the religionists to the furthest limit. It is in conformity with the ultimate goal of Islam, that is, the knowledge. There is not a single Divine Book, nor a single religion, that puts so much emphasis on knowledge, and so forcefully exhorts its followers to seek it to the farthest corners of the world as Islam does.

That is why the Qur'an explains first, the spiritual realities, and then shows the relation of its practical laws to those realities. It tells the man that he exists because God has created him by His own power; and has appointed some intermediate agents for his creation and survival, like the angels, the skies, the earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, the vegetables, the animals and, in short, the time and the space. Now he is being irresistibly driven towards his returning place and time; striving hard to reach his Lord to meet[1] Him; then he shall be recompensed for what he has done—either to the paradise or to the hell. This is the first set of the spiritual knowledge.

Then the Qur'an teaches him which deeds would lead him to the felicity of the paradise, and which to the infelicity of the hell. In other words, it teaches him the rules of Divine Worship and the social laws. This is the second set of that knowledge.

Then it makes him understand that these laws and commandments lead to the bliss in the next world. In other words, it tells him that the second set is related to the first; that these laws have been ordained for his own benefit, as they contain his good of this world as of the next. This is the third set.

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1 Or, encountering God on Judgment Day. (Ed.)

The second set is like the preliminary; the first is like its conclusion; and the third is like the binding cord that joins the second set with the first. The verses describing all these sets are numerous and clear in their meaning; and it is not necessary to quote them here.

People, generally, do not comprehend what cannot be perceived by the five senses; they do not understand ideas and realities beyond the limit of matter and nature. And those who train their minds through academic exercises to understand abstract ideas and spiritual meanings, are not all on the same level—each attains a certain degree of intellectual development and can-not understand that which is beyond it. This phenomenon causes sharp divergence in their perception of spiritual and metaphysical subjects. This vast difference is a fact that none can deny.

When we want to explain to someone a certain new idea we can do so only with the help of his previously acquired knowledge. If his perception is limited to the natural phenomena, that new idea can only be explained within the framework of that limited understanding. For example, if one wants to explain the "taste" of marriage to a minor child, one could only say that it was sweet like honey. And if that person has some advanced intellectual capacity, we may explain those spiritual realities to the extent of his ability.

Also, it should be understood that the religious guidance is not for a special group; it is for all the people.

These two factors—the difference in people's understanding and the fact that religious guidance is meant for all the people—together with the existence of the interpretation for the Qur'an, made it necessary that the spiritual realities be described in the words and phrases akin to proverbs and simile. It takes what the man already knows and uses it, because of a certain similarity, to create a picture of what he does not know. As a commodity is weighed with a stone or iron weight—there is no resemblance between the stone or iron and that commodity in form or substance, mass or volume, kind or species; the only similarity is in weight.

The Qur'an has, in the verses quoted earlier (example, *Surely We have made it an Arabic Qur'an, so that you may understand. And surely it is in the original of the Book with Us, truly elevated, full of wisdom,* 43:3-4) has hinted to this fact. But it has not stopped there. It has

described it clearly with the help of a parable concerning truth and falsehood: *He sends down water from the heavens, then the valleys flow according to their measure, and the torrent bears along the swelling form, and from what they melt in the fire for the sake of [making] ornaments or apparatus arises a scum like it; thus does Allah compare truth and falsehood; then as for the scum, it passes away as a worthless thing; and as for that which profits the people, it remains in the earth; thus does Allah set forth parables* (13:17).

This parable is as much true about God's action as it is about His word. His action, like His word, is meant for truth; but both are accompanied by some unintended things. Those unintended things temporarily cover, and come above, the intended truth; but they soon go away; the truth remains and survives to benefit the people, and the scum is removed by another truth.

The above-mentioned phenomenon is a mirror of the ambiguous verses. Such a verse contains a true meaning that is actually intended; but it is accompanied by another unintended meaning that hides the intended one and races to the minds before it. But soon it is overcome and removed by another truth (a decisive verse) that identifies the true meaning, and erases the unintended one, although it had temporarily gained the upper hand. It is so that the truth is shown to be truth by His words, and falsehood is seen to be falsehood, even though the guilty may be averse to it.

This explanation shows how the parable fits the Divine words; it may in the same manner be applied to His actions.

The parable shows that the Divine realities and spiritual knowledge are like the water which God sends down from the heavens. At that time it is water, in the pure sense of the word, unencumbered with any other condition. Then it starts flowing in the valleys; and now it takes the shape of the watercourse—a wide river, a narrow stream and so on. These shapes and measures are established facts, they are not imaginary things. (In this respect they resemble the benefits of the rules of the shariah—we have said that they are the binding cord that connect those rules with the spiritual truths. This characteristic of the rules is an established fact; it does not depend on verbal description.)

Those rules, in the course of their flow, are often accompanied by swelling foam that appears for a time being and then vanishes. An

example may be given of an abrogated verse; in the nature of thing it should have remained in force permanently, but another verse comes along, abrogates it, and puts another rule in its place. This development also is an established fact; it does not matter whether this religious reality has been clothed with words.

The spiritual realities and metaphysical ideas, inasmuch as they are placed in the containers of the words, take the shape of those containers; and are fettered with the demands of the word and the language—though originally they had no such limitation or restraint. These words are true and fact, because they were chosen by the truthful Speaker to convey His message. Yet they are like a similitude that represents the real meaning—the meaning that is unfettered by the words, unencumbered by the shapes of these containers. Therefore, the words pass through the minds of the hearers and unintended meanings surround them and ride high above them. It happens because the minds look at the words in the light of their previously acquired ideas. This mostly happens about those realities that are not familiar to common minds, like the spiritual facts, the real reason for which a certain rule was ordained and so on. But so far as the rules themselves are concerned, there occurs no change, because invariably always they talk about what is within the sphere of man's own activities, and is, therefore, familiar to him. This discourse shows that ambiguous verses are ambiguous because they contain the spiritual realities and not the rules of religion and shariah.

Now we have reached the stage where we may explain why the presence of ambiguous verses was necessary in the Qur'an.

The verbal expressions of the Qur'an are like similitudes to the sublime Divine realities. Those realities have been brought down, in these verses, to the level of common minds. An average mind does not perceive except the natural phenomena; it cannot comprehend the abstract Divine realities unless they are put in the mold of concrete expressions.

When pure spiritual facts are expressed in terms of body and matter, either of the two things may happen—both of them dangerous:

The mind may stop at those material expressions, taking them to mean natural phenomena. It will thus fail to see the reality beyond those expressions. It will, in short, take a proverb in its literal sense, not

knowing that it signifies something else; and that something is often not shown by its letters. Thus the intended meaning will be neglected. The minds will not try to look behind the screen of the words, as it will not know that it has missed anything.

If the mind realizes that the verse is a sort of a similitude and tries to see beyond the curtain of the words, by removing from it unintended elements that have no bearing on its intended significance, then there is a danger that it may discard some intended elements or leave intact some unnecessary one.

There is an Arabic proverb: "In the morning, the travellers appreciate the previous night's journey." Because we know the story behind this saying, when we hear it, we dispense with all its surrounding details, like the morning, the travellers and the previous nights's journey. What we understand from the proverb is this: A work is appreciated only when it is completed and its good results begin to appear; but so long as the man is engaged in that work and is undergoing hardships in that activity he does not like it. If we did not know the story, and stopped at the literal meaning of the proverb, we would not know its significance, and the proverb would turn into a proposition or news.

On the other hand, if we did not know the story but realized that it was a proverb, we would not know how much of it should be discarded and what was its true significance.

There is only one way to avoid these two dangers, and that is to express that one significance in various proverbs, moulding each in a different mould—one proverb would contain some details that would be missing from the other, and the former would not have some details of the latter, and so on. In this way, those sentences would, through comparison and action and reaction, clarify each other and all together would show their true significance. First, the hearer, on hearing various expressions, would realize that they were not used in their literal sense; they were like the similitudes describing an abstract idea in the moulds of various concrete expressions. Thereafter, he would be in a position to know which details were to be discarded and which to be retained—because the essential factors would be present in every sentence, while unnecessary ones would be missing from one or the other.

This device to explain difficult ideas and complicated thoughts is not peculiar to the Qur'an. It is found in every language, every nation

and every place. Man, by his nature, knows that if only one story, proverb or similitude is given to illustrate an abstract idea, unessential details would confuse the minds, and might convey to them a wrong meaning. Therefore, he tries to make the audience understand his idea with the help of a lot of stories and varied similitudes. So that they may distinguish the true significance from the unnecessary details.

It is now crystal clear that it was necessary—nay, essential—that the Qur'an should contain ambiguous verses; and that ambiguousness should be removed with the help of other unambiguous verses[w]. Those who object on the presence of such verses in the Qur'an do not know what they are talking about.

6. Conclusion

This discourse on ambiguous and decisive verses and the Qur'anic interpretation has become a bit lengthy. But through it, we have been able to clarify the following ten points:

First: The Qur'an contains two kinds of verses, the decisive and the ambiguous. If a verse, seen alone, is capable of more than one meaning, it is ambiguous; otherwise, it is decisive.

Second: The whole Qur'an, with all its decisive and ambiguous verses, has its interpretation. That interpretation is not the connotation of its words; it is an actually existing reality; a reality that has the same relation with the knowledge, facts and ideas mentioned in the Qur'an, as the significance of a proverb has with that proverb. All the Qur'anic knowledge is like a similitude for the Qur'anic interpretation that is with God.

Third: The interpretation may be known to the purified servants of God; they are the ones who are also firmly rooted in knowledge.

Fourth: It has been said in the second conclusion that the Qur'anic knowledge and ideas are like a similitude for the Qur'anic interpretation. Now, we come to a further lower level, that is, the Qur'anic words and expressions. These words and expressions, in their turn, are like a similitude to the above-mentioned Qur'anic knowledge, facts, and ideas.

Fifth: It was as essential for the Qur'an to include some ambiguous verses, as it was to have some decisive ones.

Sixth: The decisive verses are the basis of the Book, to which the

ambiguous ones are returned, that is, the latter are explained with the help of the former.

Seventh: Decisiveness and ambiguousness are relative qualities. The same verse may be decisive in one context and ambiguous in another. Also, it may be decisive in comparison to one verse and ambiguous in relation to the other.

There is no absolutely ambiguous verse in the Qur'an; although there is no reason why one or more verses may not be decisive.

Eighth: It is essential that the verses of the Qur'an should explain each other.

Ninth: The meaning of the Qur'an has various grades. They are placed vertically one behind the other. They are not ranked side by side, horizontally; otherwise, it would entail the use of one word in more than one meaning—and it is not permissible. Nor are they like real and metaphorical meanings; nor like various adjunct meanings attached to a real one. Rather, they are all various grades of the one real meaning—thus, they all are its real meanings, and the peoples' minds comprehend its various grades, according to their intellectual and spiritual capacity.

This statement requires some elaboration:

God has said: *Fear Allah as is due to Him* (3:102). The word, *al-taqwā* (piety, fear of God), denotes abstaining from what God has forbidden and doing what He has ordered. As the verse shows, the highest grade of piety is the one mentioned therein: "as is due to God." By inference, there must be other lower grades. "Piety," or in other words, "good deeds," are therefore of various grades, one above the other.

Also, He says: *Is then he who follows the pleasure of Allah like him who has brought upon himself the wrath from Allah, and whose abode is hell? And it is an evil destination. They are of [diverse] grades with Allah, and Allah sees what they do* (3:162-163).

It shows that all deeds—good and evil alike—are of various grades and ranks. That the diverse grades mentioned in the verse refer to the deeds, is clear from the concluding sentence, "and God sees what they do." Two more verses are as follows:

And for all are grades according to what they did, and so that He may pay them back fully their deeds and they shall not be dealt with unjustly (46:19); *And all have grades according to what they do; and your Lord*

is not heedless of what they do (6:132).

There are many verses of this tenor, and among them are those that show that the grades of the paradise and depths of the hell are based on the grades and degrees of the good and bad deeds respectively.

It is known that action, of whatever kind it may be, emanates from knowledge, that is, from the relevant conviction of the heart. That is why God has proved infidelity of the Jews, evil intentions of the polytheists, and duplicity of the hypocrites from their actions; as the belief and faith of the prophets and the believers has been proved from their actions. The verses having this semantic flow are very numerous and there is no need to quote them here.

Every action emanates from a relevant knowledge and demonstrates it. And then that action enhances that relevant knowledge and belief and makes it firmly settled in the mind and soul. As God says: *And (as for) those who strive hard for Us, We will most certainly guide them onto Our ways; and Allah is most surely with the doers of good* (29:69); *And worship thou thy Lord until there comes to you the certainty* (15:99); *Then evil was the end of those who did evil, because they rejected the signs of Allah and used to mock them* (30:10); *So He made hypocrisy to follow as a consequence into their hearts till the day when they shall meet Him because they failed to perform towards Allah what they had promised with Him and because they told lies* (9:77).

There are a lot of verses of this significance; and they show that every action—good or bad—creates knowledge or ignorance (that is, wrong knowledge) respectively.

There is a verse that contains the gist of this topic about good deeds and useful knowledge: *To Him do ascend the good words; and the good deed lifts them up* (35:10).

It clearly says that the good word, that is, true belief, ascends to God and brings the believers nearer to Him; and the good deeds lifts up this knowledge and belief. The ascension of knowledge and belief depends on their purity from doubt and confusion; and on undisturbed attention of the soul towards God. The more intense this purity, the higher the reach of that knowledge and belief.

The words used in the verse hint to this fact: The good words do ascend, and the good deeds do lift them up. Ascension is opposite of descension, and lifting up is opposite of putting down. When a thing

moves from a lower to a higher level it is described in these two terms that look at the two points of the movement. It is said to be ascending, because it moves towards the higher level, coming nearer to it; and is said to be rising or lifting up, because it leaves the lower place moving away from it.

The good deeds lift the man up and remove him away from this transient world and its base desires. They do not let him ensnare himself in the trinkets of this material life, or to go and get lost in the maze of the unenduring and ever-changing "knowledge." The more the good deeds lift him up, the higher his good words do ascend, and purer becomes his spiritual knowledge, farther from the impurities of confusion, doubt and imagination.

The good deeds are of diverse grades and degrees; and every grade lifts the good words and creates the knowledge of Divine realities according to its own strength and condition.

The same details are true, in reverse, for the evil deeds and bad words, that is, wrong knowledge. Evil deeds sink down the man into the yawning depths of ignorance, hypocrisy and infidelity. This subject was discussed in short in the commentary of the verse, *Guide us to the straight path* (1:6).

Now, it is clear from above that people are of different grades and ranks, so far as their nearness or distance from God is concerned. It all depends on their good or evil deeds and good or evil words, that is, knowledge. It goes without saying that what people of a certain grade would understand from a Divine Speech would be quite different from what those on a higher or lower level would understand from the same. That is what we mean when we say that the Qur'an has various meanings, all ranked vertically one behind the other.

God has mentioned in the Qur'an various categories of His servants, and has reserved for each a special kind of knowledge and cognition, For example:

Those who are freed (from sins)—they have been given knowledge of the attributes of their Lord: *Hallowed be Allah, from what they ascribe, except the servants of Allah, freed [from sins]* (37:159-160). They have also been given some other knowledge, which we shall describe, God willing, in some other place.

Those who are sure—they have the distinction. of being shown the

kingdom of the heavens and the earth: *And thus did We show Abraham the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and that he might be of those who are sure* (6:75).

Those who turn to Him again and again—they have been favored with minding: *… and none minds but he who turns [to Him] again and again* (40:13).

The learned ones—they understand the parables of the Qur'an: *And these examples, We set them forth for the people, and none understand them but the learned* (29:43). They are also the people of understanding who meditate on the Qur'an: *Do they not then reflect on the Qur'an? Nay, on the hearts there are locks* (47:24); *Do they not then meditate on the Qur'an ? And if it were from any other than Allah, they would have found in it many a discrepancy* (4:82). The three verses point to the same meaning—those who understand and meditate on the Qur'an, know the true meaning of the ambiguous verses returning them to the decisive ones.

The purified ones—they have the special distinction of the knowledge of the interpretation of the Book: *Most surely it is an honored Qur'an, in a Book that is hidden; none do touch it save the purified ones* (56:77-79).

The friends of God—they are the people submerged in the love of God; they are inattentive to everything other than God; that is why they are afraid of nothing and grieve for nothing: *Now surely the friends of Allah—they shall have no fear nor shall they grieve* (10:62).

Likewise, there are those who are near to God, the chosen ones, the truthful ones, the good ones and the believers. Each of these groups has a special kind of knowledge and perception reserved to it; and we shall describe them under relevant verses.

Face to face with these, are the grades of evil and falsehood, every grade having a peculiar type of misinformation and ignorance. The people of those grades are called unbelievers, sinners, unjust and so on. They are inclined to misinterpret the signs of God, and not to grasp the spiritual realities and their knowledge. For the sake of brevity, the verses are not given here.

Tenth: The Qur'anic verses have the capacity to be applied wherever their meanings come true. A verse is not confined to the event or circumstances in which it was revealed. It covers all situations that are

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akin to the circumstances of its revelation. In this respect also they are like the proverbs that are not restricted to their original occasion, but are applied to all similar situations. The principle is called the "flow of the Qur'an," of which a short description was written in the beginning of the first volume.

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Examining Narrations

(1) It is written in *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*: Abū ʿAbdillāh was asked about the decisive and the ambiguous verses. He said: "The decisive is that which is acted upon; and the ambiguous is that which is doubtful for the one who is ignorant of it."

Author's comment: There is a hint in the last sentence that the knowledge of the meaning of the ambiguous verse is possible to him who is not ignorant of it.

(2) The same book quotes the same Imam as saying: "The Qur'an is decisive and ambiguous. As for the decisive, you believe in it, act upon it and submit to it; and as for the ambiguous, you believe in it but do not act upon it. And it is the word of God, Mighty and Great is He: *then as for those in whose hearts there is perversity, they follow the part of it which is ambiguous, seeking to mislead, and seeking to give it [their own] interpretation, but none knows its interpretation except Allah; and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: 'We believe in it, it is all from our Lord.'* And those who are firmly rooted in knowledge are the progeny of Muḥammad"

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Author's comment: We shall discuss the last sentence later.

(3) The same book quotes Masʿadah b. Sadaqah as saying: "I asked Abū ʿAbdillāh about the abrogating (verse), and the abrogated, and the decisive and ambiguous (ones). He said: 'The abrogating is the firm (verse) that is acted upon; and the abrogated is the one that was acted upon and then came the verse that abrogated it; and the ambiguous is the one that is doubtful to him who is ignorant of it.' "

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(4) In another tradition this reply is reported as follows: "The abrogating is the firm (verse); and the abrogated is the one that passed away; and the decisive is the one that is acted upon; and the ambiguous is the one whose one part resembles the other."

(5) al-Bāqir said, *inter alia,* in a tradition: "So the abrogated (verses) are among the ambiguous ones." (*al-Kāfī*)

(6) al-Riḍā said: "He who returned the ambiguous (part) of the Qur'an to its decisive (part), was guided to the straight path." Then he said: "Verily, there is ambiguous in our traditions, like the ambiguous of the Qur'an; therefore, return its ambiguous to its decisive, and do not follow its ambiguous, lest you go astray." (*ʿUyūn al-akhbār*)

Author's comment: All the above-mentioned traditions explain the term "ambiguous" in nearly the same way. All of them support our earlier statement that the verses' ambiguousness may be removed by explaining them in the light of the decisive verses. Also, it was explained why the abrogated verse was counted among the ambiguous: It is because it seems to promulgate a perpetual law and then comes the abrogating verse and shows that its "perpetuity" is cut short. The word of the Imam, that there was ambiguous in their traditions like the ambiguous of the Qur'an and decisive like the decisive of the Qur'an, is supported by many other traditions of Ahl al-Bayt, that are nearly *al-mutawātir.* Reason also supports it. Their traditions deal with the same subjects that are described in the Qur'an; and ambiguousness is the characteristic of those subjects inasmuch as they are clothed with the words; it is not a characteristic of the word, *per se.* In short, ambiguousness happens because the verses are like the parables of the sublime spiritual facts. And this factor is equally present in the traditions. Therefore, like the Qur'an, the traditions also are ambiguous and decisive. And it has been narrated that the Prophet said: "We, the group of the prophets, have been ordered to talk with the people according to the capacity of their understanding."

(7) It is narrated in *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* from Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad from his father (peace be on them both) that a man said to Amīr al-muʾminīn [Imam ʿAlī]: "Will you describe to us our Lord, so that we may love and know Him more." Hearing it, he became angry and delivered a sermon, in which he said: "You should stick, O servant of God to what the Qur'an has shown you about His attributes, and the Messenger has guided you about His knowledge; and seek illumination from the light of his guidance, because it is a bounty and a wisdom that you

have been given. Therefore, accept what you have been given and be of the grateful ones. And whatever task Satan imposes on you, which neither the Book has imposed upon you nor the traditions of the Messenger and the (truly) guiding Imams have ordered you (to know), then entrust its knowledge to God; and do not (try to) measure the greatness of God. And know, O servant of God! that those who are firmly rooted in knowledge are those whom God has kept above the need of crashing into the screens put before the unseen; so they took it upon themselves to acknowledge all that they were unaware of its explanation, from the unseen that is screened off, and they said: *We believe in it, it is all from our Lord.* And God has praised (them for) their acknowledging their inability to get that which their knowledge had not encompassed. And when they refrained from going into what God had not ordered them to search, God called this refraining as *being firmly rooted in knowledge.* Therefore, be content with this much, and do not measure the greatness of God with the measure of your understanding; otherwise, you would be of those who are doomed to perdition."

Author's comment: The sentence, "And know … that those who are firmly rooted in knowledge …," throws further light on the meaning of "and" in the word of God, "and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say …." This tradition shows that, according to the Imam, that "and" is not a conjunctive; it starts a new sentence, as we have explained in the commentary. What this tradition, however, shows is that this verse does not prove that those who are firmly rooted in knowledge know the interpretation of the Qur'an; not that it proves that they do not know the said interpretation. It does not deny the existence of other proofs to show that they know this interpretation, as we have explained earlier; and some traditions of the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt also support it. The words, "are those whom God has kept above the need of …," are the predicate of the subject, "those who are firmly rooted …"

The sermon exhorts the enquirer to hold fast to the practice of those who are firmly rooted in knowledge; to confess his ignorance of what he does not know—in this way he would become one of them.

It means that, according to the Imam, those people are firmly rooted in knowledge who hold fast to what they know and do not cross the boundary to what they do not know. "The unseen that is hidden behind the screens" is the intended meaning of the ambiguous verse that is hidden from common minds. That is why the Imam mentioned soon after that they "acknowledge all that they were unaware of its explanation from the unseen …"; note that he did not say, "unaware of its interpretation …."

(8) al-Ṣādiq said: "We are those who are firmly rooted in knowledge; and we know its interpretation." (*al-Kāfī*)

Author's comment: It may appear from this tradition that the Imam took the word "and," in the verse, "and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge," as a conjunctive and that, in addition to God, those also knew the Qur'anic interpretation who were firmly rooted in knowledge. But this apparent connotation is not in place, because of the explanation given earlier, and also because of the preceding tradition.

Also, it is possible that the Imam used the word "interpretation," as a synonymous for "exegesis"; such usage was common in the early centuries.

"… and we know its interpretation": A preceding tradition also had said: "And those who are firmly rooted in knowledge are the progeny of Muḥammad." This statement is found in other traditions too. All this is a part of the flow of the Qur'an—applying the verses wherever they fit perfectly.

(9) It is reported in *al-Kāfī* from Hishām b. al-Ḥakam that he said: "Abu al-Ḥasan Musa b. Jaʿfar told me: '… O Hishām! Verily, God quoted a good people as saying: *Our Lord! Make not our hearts to deviate after Thou hast guided us [aright]; and grant us from Thee mercy; surely Thou art the most liberal Giver.* They were aware that the hearts could deviate and return to their blindness and perdition. Verily, he did not fear God who did not understand from God; and (as for him) who did not understand from God, his heart would not be resolute with a confirmed knowledge, which he could visualize and whose reality he could find in his heart. And only that one can be like this whose word confirms his deeds, and whose private (life) is in conformity with his manifest (one); because God (Honored is

His name!) did not prove (one's) esoteric (and) hidden wisdom except through its manifestation and declaration.' "

Author's comment: "Verily, he did not fear God who did not understand from God": It expresses the same idea as the words of God: *Verily fear Allah only those of His servants who are possessed of knowledge* (35:28). The sentence, "and (as for him) who did not understand from God, his heart would not be resolute with a confirmed knowledge …," is the best expression to explain the significance of being firmly rooted in knowledge. Unless a reality is thoroughly understood, the loopholes of doubts and confusion would not be closed, and the heart would remain perturbed and perplexed in believing it. But when the understanding is completed and the heart resolutely believes in it, it would not go against the dictates of that firm knowledge; and would not follow the temptations of desire. Then there would be no discrepancy between his secret and open lives; what would be in his heart would manifest itself through his deeds; what he would say would conform with what he does.

The words, "and only that one can be like this whose word confirms …," describe the characteristics of those who are firmly rooted in knowledge.

(10) Ibn Jarīr, Ibn Abī Ḥātim and al-Ṭabarānī have narrated from Anas, Abū Amāmah, Wāthilah b. Asqaʿ and Abū al-Dardāʾ that the Messenger of God was asked about: *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge.* He said: "He whose oath is abode by, and his tongue is truthful, and his heart is steadfast, and whose stomach and genitals are chaste, then that is among those who are firmly rooted in knowledge." (*al-Durr al-manthūr*)

Author's comment: This tradition may be explained in terms of the preceding one.

(11) al-Bāqir said: "Verily, those who are firmly rooted in knowledge are those in whose knowledge there is no discrepancy." (*al-Kāfī*)

Author's comment: This explanation fits the verse perfectly. The verse shows that perversity and deviation of heart is opposite of firmly rooted knowledge. Therefore, there would be no deviation, confusion and discrepancy in the knowledge of those who are firmly rooted in knowledge.

(12) Ibn Abī Shaybah, Aḥmad, al-Tirmidhī, Ibn Jarīr, al-Ṭabarānī and Ibn Marduwayh have narrated from Umm Salmah: "Verily, the Messenger of God used to say very often in his invocations, 'O God, O Turner of the hearts! Keep my heart firm on thy religion.' I said: 'O Messenger of God! and do the hearts turn?' He said: 'Yes. God has not created a single human being from the progeny of Adam but that his heart is between two of the fingers of God; then if He wills, He keeps it straight; and if He wills, He turns it away …' " (*al-Durr al-manthūr*)

Author's comment: This idea has been narrated through several chains from a number of companions, like Jābir, Nawwās b. Samʿān, ʿAbdullāh b. ʿUmar and Abū Hurayrah. The well-known are the words of the tradition of Nawwās: "The heart of the son of Adam is between two of the fingers of the Beneficent (God)." And the same words have been narrated, as I think, by al-Sharīf al-Raḍī in his *al-Majāzātu al-nabawiyyah.*

(13) It has been narrated from ʿAlī that he was asked: "Is there with you anything of the revelation? (that is, do you receive any revelation from God?) He replied: "No, by Him Who split the grain and created the soul! Except that God gives a servant understanding of His Book."

Author's comment: It is one of the most important traditions. The least that may be proved from it is that all that astonishing knowledge that spread from him and which even today stuns the minds, was all derived from the Qur'an.

(14) al-Ṣādiq narrated from his father through his forefathers (peace be on them all) that the Messenger of God said: "O people! You are in an interim station, and you are riding on a journey, and the speed with which you are taken away is fast; and you have seen the night and the day and the sun and the moon (how) they wear out every new (thing), and bring near every distant (object), and bring out every promised (affair); therefore, prepare your outfit for the distant journey." The Imam said that at this point al-Miqdād b. al-Aswad stood up and asked: "And what is the interim station? O Messenger of God!" He said: "The house of communication and cessation. Therefore, when mischiefs come to confuse you like the

segments of a dark night, then hold fast to the Qur'an; as it is the intercessor whose intercession shall be granted; and a credible advocate; and whoever keeps it before him, it will lead him to the Garden; and whoever keeps it behind, it will drive him to the Fire; and it is the guide that guides to the best path; and it is a Book in which there is explanation, particularization and recapitulation; and it is a decisive (word), and not a joke; and there is for it a manifest (meaning) and an esoteric (one); thus its apparent (meaning) is firm, and its esoteric (one) is knowledge; its exterior is elegant and its interior deep; it has (many) boundaries, and its boundaries have (many) boundaries; its wonders shall not cease, and its (unexpected) marvels shall not be old. There are in it the lamps of guidance and the beacon of wisdom, and a guide to knowledge. for him who knows the attributes. Therefore, one should extend his sight; and should let his eyes reach the attribute; so that one who is in perdition may get deliverance, and one who is entangled may get free; because meditation is the life of the heart of the one who sees, as the one having a light (easily) walks in the darkness; therefore, you must seek good deliverance and (that) with little waiting." (*al-Kāfī*)

Author's comment: al-ʿAyyāshī has narrated it up to the words, "therefore, one should extend his sight."

(15) It is narrated in *al-Kāfī* and *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* from al-Ṣādiq that he said that the Messenger of God said: "The Qur'an is a guide from wilderness, an eyesight for the blind, a pardon for the sinner, and a light against darkness; a brightness from the happenings, and safety from disaster, and guidance from going astray; a clarity in the chaos, and the means to reach (safely) from this world to the next; and there is in it the perfection of your religion; and no one deviated from the Qur'an except to the Fire."

Author's comment: There are countless such traditions narrated from the Prophet and the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt (peace be on them all).

(16) It is narrated in *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* from al-Fuḍayl b. Yasār that he said: "I asked Abū Jaʿfar about this tradition: 'There is no verse in the Qur'an but it has an exterior and an interior, and

there is no word in it but it has a boundary, and every boundary has a watching place.' (I asked him) what was the meaning of exterior and interior. The Imam said: 'Its exterior is its revelation; and its interior is its interpretation; some of it has already passed (that is happened) and there is some of it that has not come about yet; it runs along as run the sun and the moon, when a thing of it comes (to its appointed place and time) it happens. God has said: *and none knows its interpretation except Allah and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge;* we know it.' "

Author's comment: "Some of it has already passed and there is some of it that has not come about yet": Apparently the pronoun "it" stands for the Qur'an—for its revelation and interpretation both. Therefore, the sentence "it runs along as run the sun and the moon," will apply to both the revelation and the interpretation. So far as the revelation (that is, the revealed word) is concerned it is the same thing as applying the verse to all situations in which its import comes true; and which is termed as the flow of the Qur'an. For example, look at the verse: *O you who believe! fear Allah and be with the true ones* (9:119). It was addressed, initially, to the believers who were present at the time of its revelation. Now it is applied to all the believers who came afterwards and will come up to the Day of Resurrection. It is the most obvious application that is practised not only by the Muslims but by all sensible persons in every language.

But there are some other ways of finer and still more finer applications. For example, when the verses of fighting are used to exhort, the believers to fight against their own selves, or when the verses condemning the hypocrites are applied to the sinful believers, it is a finer application.

When one proceeds further in one's spiritual journey then the above-mentioned verses of fighting and hypocrisy as well as the verses concerning the sinners are applied to those virtuous servants of God who for a fleeting moment turn towards unavoidable worldly affairs, thus disrupting their meditation, remembrance of, and presence before, God. Needless to say that it is a much more finer application than the previous ones.

And its finest application comes when those most perfect, most

virtuous and most beloved servants of God apply those verses to themselves because they, in their love of God, think that they have failed in discharging their duty to God.

From the above discourse, it becomes clear that:

First: The Qur'an has connotations of varying degrees, that are applied to various groups according to their spiritual perfection. Those who have described the stages of faith in, and love of, God, have mentioned even more finer applications than those written above.

Second: "Exterior" and "interior" are relative attributes. Every exterior is interior when seen in relation to a more exterior meaning; and every interior is exterior in comparison to a more interior one. The following tradition explicitly mentions this fact.

(17) al-ʿAyyāshī has narrated, in his *Tafsīr,* from Jābir that he said: "I asked Abū Jaʿfar the explanation of (a verse of) the Qur'an, and he explained it to me. Thereafter, I asked him (the same question) and he gave me a different reply. So I told him: 'May I be your ransom! You had given me, before this day, a different reply to this very question!' Thereupon he said: 'O Jābir! verily, the Qur'an has an interior, and for its interior there is an interior; and (it has) an exterior, and for its exterior there is an exterior. O Jābir! and there is nothing farther from the understanding of the men than the explanation of the Qur'an. Verily a verse, its first (part) is about (that is, throws light on) one subject, and its middle is about another matter, and its end is about a third thing, and (still) it is a well-connected speech, (that) revolves in various ways.' "

(18) The same book narrates a tradition from the same Imam in which he said: "If a verse is revealed about a people and those people die, that verse does not die. Otherwise, nothing would have survived of the Qur'an. But the Qur'an, its first is applied to its last, so long as the heavens and the earth will continue. And for every group there is a verse, which they recite, they are from it (that is, it is applied to them) either from good or from evil."

(19) Ḥumrān b. Aʿyan said: "I asked Abū Jaʿfar about the exterior of the Qur'an and its interior; and he said: 'Its exterior are those people about whom the Qur'an was revealed; and its interior

are those who do as those had done; that which was revealed about those flows about these (that is, it is applied to the followers also).' " (*Maʿānī al-akhbār*)

(20) It is narrated in the *Tafsīr al-Ṣāfī* that ʿAlī said: "There is no verse but it has four meanings: Manifest, and esoteric, and boundary and rising (or watching) place. So, the manifest is the recitation, and esoteric is the comprehension, and boundary is the commandments of lawful and unlawful, and rising (or watching) place is the Divine purpose, expected of the servant through this verse."

Author's comment: "Recitation" is counted as one of the meanings; it shows that this word refers to the apparent meaning of the verse. Then "comprehension," which is given as its opposite, would mean the inner (esoteric) meaning hidden behind the apparent one; "the commandments of lawful and unlawful" refers to that Qur'anic knowledge which one acquires in its first or intermediate stages; thus it stands face to face with the "rising (or watching) place" which is the highest grade of the meaning. Probably, the boundary and the rising place are relative terms, as the manifest and the esoteric are—thus every higher grade may be called a rising place in comparison to a lower level.

al-Maṭlaʿ (rising place, horizon) may also be read *al-muṭṭalaʿ* (the watching place). As the Imam has said, it refers to that Divine purpose for which the verse was revealed and which the servant of God is expected to fulfil.

These four meanings have also been mentioned in a famous tradition of the Prophet which is as follows:

"Verily, the Qur'an has been revealed on seven letters: For every verse of it, there is an exterior and an interior, and for every boundary there is a rising place."

In another version the last sentence is as follows: "and for each there is a boundary and a rising place."

According to the first version ("for every boundary there is a rising place"), it means that for each exterior and interior—that is, the boundary—there is a rising place to which it ascends. This meaning is clear. And the second version ("for each there is a boundary and a rising place") may also be interpreted in the same way: each exterior and interior has a boundary, that is, its own meaning, and each has a

rising place to which it ascends—in other words, it would be referring to the "interpretation." But this explanation is not in conformity with the tradition of ᶜAlī mentioned above ("There is no verse but it has four meanings …").

In the light of the above given discourse, the four terms may be explained in the following way:

The exterior is the manifest meaning that is understood from the words of the verse.

The interior is the esoteric meaning which is hidden behind the manifest one. It may be one or more—one behind the other—nearer to the manifest one or distant, with or without any intermediate link.

The boundary is the meaning, whether the exterior or the interior.

The rising place is that meaning from which the boundary (as explained above) arises. In other words, it is the esoteric meaning that is immediately adjacent to the boundary.

(21) There is a tradition, narrated through both the Shīᶜah and the Sunnī chains, from the Prophet that he said: "The Qur'an has been revealed on seven letters."

Author's comment: Although there are some minor differences in the wordings of various versions of this tradition, it has been narrated by so many people as to make it nearly *al-mutawātir;* and the narrations are nearly similar in meaning, and have come both from the Shīᶜahs and the Sunnīs. There is a great controversy concerning the meaning of this tradition—some forty explanations have been given for it. But, in reality, there should not be any difficulty in understanding it, because its explanation is given in the traditions themselves; and that should be followed, instead of inventing new explanations.

Some of these traditions say: The Qur'an has come down on seven letters: order, restraint, exhortation, intimidation, argument, stories and parables."

Another version counts them as follows: restraint, order, lawful, unlawful, decisive, ambiguous and parables.

ᶜAlī is reported as saying: "Verily God revealed the Qur'an on seven categories, each of which is sufficient and satisfying; and they are: order, restraint, exhortation, intimidation, argument, parables and stories."

Therefore, the seven letters must be explained as seven modes of address, seven kinds of expression. They are seven; yet they are one

in their aim, because all invite to God, and call to His straight path.

It may be inferred from these traditions that all fundamental spiritual knowledge is confined within the parables; because other six categories cannot be applied to those realities, except by stretching the meanings of the words.

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Traditions on Interpreting the Qur'an According to One's own Opinion

(1) The Prophet said: "Whoever interprets (that is, explains) the Qur'an according to his opinion, should settle himself in his seat of Fire." (*al-Ṣāfī*)

Author's comment: This matter has been narrated by both the Sunnīs and the Shīʿahs. And there are many other traditions of the same import, narrated from the Prophet and the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt.

(2) It is narrated in *Munyat al-murīd* that the Prophet said: "Whoever spoke about the Qur'an without knowledge, should settle himself in his seat of Fire."

Author's comment: Also, it has been narrated by Abū Dāwūd in his al-Sunan.

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(3) The Prophet said: "Whoever speaks about the Qur'an without knowledge, shall come on the Day of Resurrection reined with a rein of fire." (*Munyat al-murīd*)

(4) The same book narrates that the Prophet said: "Whoever spoke about the Qur'an of his own opinion (even if) he was right, he committed wrong."

Author's comment: This tradition has also been narrated by Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasāʾī.

(5) The Prophet said: "What I am afraid of, most of all, concerning my *ummah* after me, is the man who will take the Qur'an putting it in wrong place (that is, giving wrong interpretations)." (*al-Munyat al-murīd*)

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(6) Abū Baṣīr said that Abū ʿAbdillāh said: "Whoever interprets the Qur'an according to his own opinion, if he gets to the right interpretation, he shall not be rewarded; and if he errs then he shall be farther away from the heaven. (*Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*)

(7) The same book quotes Yaʿqūb b. Yazīd who narrated from Yāsir that al-Riḍā said: "Opinion in the Book of God is infidelity."

Author's comment: This theme is found in other traditions written in *ʿUyūn al-akhbār, al-Khiṣāl* and *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* among other books.

The words of the Prophet: "Whoever interprets (that is, explains) the Qur'an according to his opinion": *al-Raʿy* (opinion) means the belief reached at after diligent research. It is also used for the opinion based on desire and one's own inclination. The Prophet has used the phrase, "his opinion"; it shows that what is condemned is the interpretation of a verse independently without looking at other relevant verses. It does not forbid striving hard and doing one's utmost to understand the meaning of the Qur'an; nor does it say that one should confine oneself to what has been said in the traditions of the Prophet and Ahl al-Bayt relating to the exegesis of the verses (as many traditionalists think). Otherwise, it would be diametrically opposed to the many verses which show that the Qur'an is plain Arabic and which exhort the people to meditate on it; also it would be against many traditions that tell them to turn to the Qur'an and judge the traditions by it.

What the words, "according to his opinion," refer to is explaining the Qur'an according to one's personal views by being independent of other Qur'anic declarations. This happens when an exegete depends solely on the instruments of Arabic language and literature, which are used for understanding a human talk. When we hear a speech of a man we at once look towards the rules of the language so that we may understand what the speaker means, and in this way we decide its import; we use this method everywhere, even in legal matters like testimony and acknowledgement. We use this method because human speech is based on the rules of language and rhetorics.

But the Qur'an's diction is not based on this foundation, as we have explained earlier. The whole Qur'an is a speech whose sentences and verses are all related to one another; at the same time they are separate from each other; one part speaks with, and leads to the others, as ʿAlī has said: "Obviously, it is not enough to look at a single verse in the light of language and literature and decide what it means, unless one meditates on all the relevant verses and strives one's utmost to find out from all of them together what that particular verse means. The verse 4:82 points to this very fact, as we have explained in the topic of brevity: *Do they not then meditate on the Qur'an? And if it were from any other than Allah, they would have found in it many a discrepancy.*

Explaining the Qur'an according to one's opinion is, thus, prohibited. And this prohibition is directed to the way of exegesis, and not to the exegesis itself. In other words, the Prophet has forbidden the people to try to understand the Divine words by the same methods which are used to understand a human speech—it is irrelevant whether they succeed in comprehending its true meaning or not. That is why he has said in another tradition: "Whoever spoke about the Qur'an of his own opinion, (even if) he was right, he committed wrong." This dictum clearly proves that the mistake lies in choosing the way; it does not matter whether that way takes one to the true destination or not. The same is the explanation of the words, narrated in the tradition of al-ʿAyyāshī: "if he gets to the right interpretation, he shall not be rewarded."

This view is supported also by the state of affairs in the days of the Prophet. The revelation of the Qur'an was not yet completed; and what was revealed was not yet arranged; not all the Muslims had in their hands all the revealed verses—most of them had only a few chapters and verses with them. Had they been allowed to explain every piece or verse separately, without comparing that piece with other relevant verses, they would almost certainly have fallen into error.

It appears from the above discourse that what the exegete has been forbidden is to interpret a verse of the Qur'an independently, relying on his own knowledge and opinion, without reference to another authority. In other words, it is necessary, when one wants to explain a Qur'anic verse, to seek help from others by referring the matter to them. Who is that other authority? It could only be either other Qur'anic verses, or the traditions. The second alternative is out of question, because the Prophet has ordered the Muslims to refer the traditions to the Qur'an; it cannot be the other way round. The tradition's meanings and even their authenticity is tested by the Qur'an; how can tradition decide the meaning of the Qur'an? Thus, there remains only one valid and approved way of explaining the verses of the Qur'an, and that is with the help of other relevant verses.

This much is enough to show the irrelevance of numerous explanations written about the tradition of "interpreting the Qur'an by one's own opinion." The scholars have explained this tradition in not less than ten ways:

First: It means interpreting the Qur'an without expertise in those subjects which are essential for knowing its exegesis. And al-Suyūṭī has said in *al-Itqān* that they are fifteen in all: Language, syntax, conjugation, etymology, styles of literature, rhetoric, elocution, recitation of the Qur'an, roots of religion, fundamentals of jurisprudence, reasons and occasions of revelations (as well as the stories mentioned in the Qur'an), abrogating and abrogated verses, law of the shariah, traditions that explain the general and unspecific verses, and the gifted knowledge. This last phrase refers to a tradition of the Prophet: "Whoever acts upon what he knows, God gives him knowledge of what he does not know."

Second: It refers to the attempts of finding the interpretations of the ambiguous verses, which no one knows except God.

Third: It is interpretation of the Qur'an to support a wrong belief or action. It happens when an exegete makes his own view or belief the foundation upon which he builds the exegesis of the Qur'an; he fits the verse on his own belief in any possible way—no matter how weak or far-fetched that might be.

Fourth: It is declaring, without any proof, that a certain explanation is the meaning really intended by God.

Fifth: It refers to explaining the Qur'an according to one's inclination and desire.

These five explanations of the said tradition have been narrated by Ibn al-Naqīb, as al-Suyūṭī has quoted in *al-Itqān*. There are five other explanations which we enumerate here from other books:

Sixth: It is explaining the difficult passages of the Qur'an in a new way which was not narrated from the companions and their disciples—because such an interpretation would make the exegete liable to the displeasure of God.

Seventh: The tradition is about explaining the Qur'an in a certain way, while the speaker knows that it is not the true explanation.

These last two have been mentioned by Ibn al-Anbari.

Eighth: The tradition forbids talking about the Qur'an without knowledge and without making sure—it does not matter whether the speaker knows or not that another explanation is true.

Ninth: It forbids reliance on the apparent meaning of the Qur'an. It is the explanation of those who think that the apparent meaning of the Qur'an is not a valid authority; to understand a verse, one must

look to a clear tradition narrated from a sinless authority (that is, the Prophet, his daughter and the twelve Imams, peace be on them all). But in fact it shall not be an exegesis of the Qur'an; rather it shall be following the tradition. Anyhow, according to this group, exegesis of the Qur'an depends on the explanation of a sinless authority.

Tenth: There were some people who believed that the Qur'an had valid apparent meanings, but said that common people could not understand it. According to this view also, relying on the apparent meaning of the Qur'an was forbidden by this tradition. One must look for clear traditions of the sinless authorities to interpret the Qur'an.

These are ten explanations of the said tradition—although some may in effect be identical to some others. In any case, none of these is supported by any proof. Moreover, some are obviously wrong, or their inaccuracy may be understood from what we have earlier said about this tradition. There is no need to point it out again.

There are many verses that support the traditions mentioned earlier: *Do they not meditate on the Qur'an? And if it were from any other than Allah, they would have found in it many a discrepancy* (4:82); *Those who made the Qur'an into shreds* (15:91); *Surely they who distort Our signs are not hidden from Us. What! is he then who is cast into the fire better or he who comes safe on the Day of Resurrection? Do what you like, surely He sees what you do* (41:40); *… [there are those who] alter words from their places …*(4:46); *And pursue not that of which you have not the knowledge* (17:36). Such verses in conjunction with the above-mentioned traditions make it clear that the prohibition contained in those traditions is about the method used for the exegesis; they show that when explaining the Divine Speech, one should not adopt the same means that are used for explaining human talks.

What is the difference between Divine and human speeches? It is not in the use of words, the construction of sentences or the style of elocution. The Qur'an is in plain Arabic, and all norms of eloquence have been mentioned in it. God Himself has said: *And We did not send any apostle but with the language of his people, so that he might explain to them clearly* (14:4); *… and this is clear Arabic language* (16:103); *Surely We have made it an Arabic Qur'an so that you may understand* (43:3).

The difference between the two is about the meaning and its application. This statement needs some elaboration:

We are at home in this material word, and surrounded with its natural phenomena. As a result, when we hear a word our mind, first of all, looks at its physical connotation and application. When a fellow human being describes a thing or affair, we apply his words to what we are accustomed to in this world; because we know that the speaker too is governed by the same forces as we are, and his comprehension and cognition is not different from ours. In this way the application of a word affects its meaning—it may particularize a general meaning or vice versa; the circumstances may manipulate a word's connotation in a lot of ways. It is what we call rational context, in contrast to the textual evidence.

For example, if we hear a powerful and wealthy man saying, "There is not a thing but with us are the treasures of it," first we shall look at the literal meaning of this sentence, then will come the stage of its application. At this stage, we shall say that he has many strong and well-protected buildings which have got a lot of containers of various types to store his treasures, that consist of a large quantity of gold, silver, currency notes, bonds, jewels, various commodities, ornamental items, arms and ammunitions etc. We get this picture in our mind because this is what we call treasure and that is how it is kept safe and secure. But we will never imagine that he has in his treasury the earth and the heavens, the continents and the oceans, the sun and the moon, the animals and the human beings. These too are "things," but they are not possessed, gathered and put in a treasury. Because of this rational context we do restrict the generality of the word "thing" and apply it to a few selected items only; and in those items too only a small amount is presumed to be kept in his treasury. We know that a lot of things are not treasured, and what is treasured, only a small amount comes into possession of one man, and that small quantity is preserved in strong, impregnable buildings to protect it from theft and other damages. And this knowledge of ours has restricted the general meaning of the words, "thing" and "treasures."

But now we hear God revealing to His Messenger: *And there is not a thing but with Us are the treasures of it* (15:21). If our mind is not developed, and is still on the lowest rung of comprehension, we shall interpret this verse in exactly the same manner. Of course, we shall not have any proof to say that the verse has been used in the same sense;

yet we shall rush to that explanation, because our mind is accustomed to it. This is, then, explaining the Qur'an according to our own opinion without knowledge.

Now let us say that our understanding is a bit more developed, and we know that God does not gather things to put them in a treasury. We think over this verse and read the next sentence: *and We do not send it down but in a known measure;* and then we compare it with another verse : … *and [in] what Allah sends down sustenance from the cloud, then gives life thereby to the earth after its death … there are signs for a people who understand* (45:5). We shall at once say that the word "thing," in the verse under discussion, refers to the sustenance like bread and water; and that "sending it down," in the next sentence, refers to the coming down of rain. We shall give it this interpretation because we do not know of anything, except the rain, that comes down from heavens; therefore, we shall say that accumulation of everything near God and then its coming down in measured quantity refers to the accumulation of rain and its coming down to the earth to produce food grains. This too shall be interpreting the Qur'an according to one's own opinion "without knowledge." What is our argument? It is that we do not know of anything, except the rain, that descends from the heaven. But "not knowing" that a certain thing exists is quite different from "knowing" that it does not exist.

If our knowledge is more advanced and our mind more developed, we shall try not to say anything concerning the Qur'an without knowledge. We shall say that the words of the verse are general; they should not be restricted in any way. "Thing" includes everything, and the word, "treasures," covers every single item of everything. We shall arrive at the conclusion that the sentence describes the affairs of the creation and the creatures. Then will come to the puzzling sentence, "and We do not send it down but in a known measure." Doubtlessly, human beings, animals and vegetables do not come down from the heavens; they grow from, and are born on, the earth. Faced with this difficulty, we shall say that the first sentence, "And there is not a thing but with Us are the treasures of it," is a metaphorical way of saying that everything in its existence is subservient to the will of God; that the Divine will is like a treasure that holds every creature, and only as much issues forth from it as is willed by God. But this interpretation also,

like the previous two, is based on "not knowing." We "do not know" that the things descend (in the meaning known to us) from God, and, therefore, we explain away the sentence in an allegorical way.

If you look at the Divine names, attributes and actions as described in the Qur'an, or at the Qur'anic declarations about the angels, the Divine Books, the apostles and the Day of Resurrection and its details, or at the laws of the shariah and their significance as given in the Qur'an, and then ponder on the way people want to interpret them in the light of rational context, you will see that all such exercises are but interpretations according to one's own liking without knowledge; that they should better be called misinterpretations.

We have shown under the fifth heading in the discourse of the decisive and the ambiguous verses that the Qur'anic expressions *vis-a-vis* the Divine realities are like a proverb in relation to its significance; and those realities have been explained in various expressions and diverse wordings, so that all taken together may lead the hearers to their real significance. That is why the verses are said to be witnesses of each other; and that is how they explain one another. Otherwise, the Divine realities could never be correctly explained; and people would have fallen in the pitfall of interpreting the Qur'an without knowledge.

The above discourse shows that interpreting the Qur'an according to one's own opinion is always accompanied by speaking about it without knowledge. The tradition of the Prophet points to this fact: "Whoever spoke about the Qur'an without knowledge should settle himself in his seat of Fire."

It is such interpretations that make it look as though the verses of the Qur'an were contradictory to one another. Interpreting the verses by one's own opinion, without true knowledge, disturbs the semantic flow of the Qur'an. Thus the verses are misinterpreted, the words shifted from their right places and used in wrong contexts. Then it becomes necessary for these exegetes to explain some or most of the verses in a way that is against their apparent meanings; Divine words and sentences are given such meanings which the linguists had never heard of. Thus we find a group explaining away the verses of free will and choice, and their opponents misinterpreting the verses of Divine decree and measure. Most of the Muslim sects are guilty of this type of misinterpretation, especially in those verses whose apparent meanings

go against their beliefs. They seek refuge in clothing such verses with meanings of their own choice, and their so called arguments boil down to this sentence: The apparent meaning of this verse is against what has already been established by rational proofs; therefore, it must be given a new meaning, against the apparent one.

This practice creates confusion; the logical sequence of the verses is disrupted, their semantic flow is disturbed and they seem to contradict each other. Thus both lose their validity.

It is known that there is no discrepancy in the Qur'an. If a certain explanation shows that two verses are contradictory to each other, the only defect would be in that explanation.

This has been termed, in many traditions, as hitting one part of the Qur'an with the other. See for example the following traditions:

(8) It is narrated in *al-Kāfī* and *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* from al-Ṣādiq from his father (peace be on them both) that he said: "A man does not hit a part of the Qur'an with the other (part) but that he becomes an infidel."

(9) *Maʿānī al-akhbār, al-Maḥāsin* (through their chains) and *at-Tafsīr* of al-ʿAyyāshī: al-Ṣādiq said: "A man does not hit a part of the Qur'an with the other (part) but that he becomes an infidel."

(10) al-Ṣadūq says that he asked Ibn al-Walīd what this tradition meant. He replied: "It is replying to a man concerning the exegesis of one verse, with the exegesis of another one."

Author's comment: This reply of Ibn al-Walīd is somewhat vague. If by this expression he means the above mentioned mixup—as the polemicists, argue by offering one verse "against" another, adhering to the one and explaining away the other—then he is correct. But if he wants to disallow explaining one verse with the help of the other and bringing the one as evidence for the other, then it is wrong, as may be seen from the following two traditions too:

(11) It is narrated in *Tafsīr* of al-Nuʿmānī, through his chains to Ismāʿīl b. Jābir that he said: "I heard Abū ʿAbdillāh Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq (peace be upon them both) saying: 'Verily, God—Benevolent and High is He—sent Muḥammad and ended with him (the chain of) the prophets thus there is no prophet after him; and He sent down to him a Book, and

ended with it (the chain of) the Books; thus there is no (Divine) book after it. He allowed in it the lawful (things) and prohibited in it the unlawful; so its lawful is lawful up to the Day of Resurrection, and its unlawful is unlawful up to the Day of Resurrection; there is in it your shariah, and the information of the people (who passed away) before you and (who are to come) after you; and the Prophet (may God have mercy on him and his progeny!) appointed it as a standard (that will remain) for ever in his successors. But the people left them (those successors) although they were the witnesses over the people of all times; and they (that is, the people) deviated from them, then they killed them, and followed others and gave those others their unalloyed obedience. (This continued) till they extended their enmity to him who showed his love of those invested with authority (from God) and who sought their knowledge. God has said: … *and [they] have forgotten a part of what they were admonished with, and you will not cease to be informed of deceit from among them* (5:14). And it is because they hit a part of the Qur'an with the other; and they argued with the abrogated (verse) thinking that it was the abrogating one, and debated with the help of the ambiguous thinking that it was the decisive; and offered a particularized verse for their argument assuming that it was a general one; and stuck at the beginning of a verse leaving aside the reason of its interpretation; and they did not see what was the beginning of the speech and what was its end; and they did not know its arrival or its departure, because they did not take it from its people; thus they went astray and misled others.

"And know, may God have mercy on you! that he who does not distinguish in the Book of God the abrogating verse from the abrogated one, and a specific from a general one, and a decisive from an ambiguous; and does not differentiate between a permission and an obligation, and does not recognize a verse of Meccan period from a Medinite one, and does not know the reasons of revelation; and does not understand the difficult words of the Qur'an (whether simple or compound); and does not comprehend (what has been hidden in it of) the knowledge

of (Divine) decree and measure; and is ignorant of advancing and delaying (in its verses); and does not distinguish the clear from the deep, nor the manifest from the esoteric, nor the beginning from the termination; and is unaware of the question and the answer, the disjoining and the joining, and the exceptions and the all inclusive, and is ignorant of an adjective of a preceding (noun) that explains the subsequent one; and is unaware of the emphasized subject and the detailed one, the obligatory laws and the permissions, the places of the duties and rules, and the meaning of its lawful and unlawful (in which the unbelievers have perished); and does not know the joined words, and the words that are related to those coming before them, or after them—then such a man does not know the Qur'an; nor is he among the people of the Qur'an; And if someone claims knowledge of these variations, without a proof, then he is a liar, a doubting (person), and a fabricator of lies against God and His Messenger, and his resting place is the hell, and what an evil destination it is!"

(12) It is written in *Nahj al-balāghah* and *al-Iḥtijāj* that ʿAlī said in a sermon: "When a legal problem is put before one of them he passes judgment on it according to his opinion. Then exactly the same problem comes before another of them and he gives an opposite verdict. Then these judges bring this matter to their leader who had appointed them and he confirms all their (contradictory) verdicts, although their God is one and their Prophet is one and their Book is one. Is it because God had ordered them to differ and they obeyed Him? Or He had prohibited them from it but they disobeyed Him? Or is it that God had sent an incomplete religion and sought their help to complete it? Or, they are His partners, so that it is their right to say and it is His duty to agree? Or is it that God sent a complete religion but the Prophet fell short of conveying it and handing it over (to the *ummah*)? And God, the Glorified, says: *We have not neglected anything in the Book* (6:38); and that in it is the clarification of everything; and He has said that one part of the Book confirms the other and that there is no discrepancy in it: *And if it were from any other than Allah, they would have*

found in it many a discrepancy (4:82). And verily, the exterior of the Qur'an is elegant and its esoteric (meaning) is deep. Its wonders cannot be enumerated, and its marvels will not cease; and the darkness cannot be removed except by it."

Author's comment: This narration clearly shows that every religious opinion and view must be based on the Qur'an. The sentence, "in it is the clarification of everything," paraphrases a Qur'anic verse, (… *and We have revealed the Book to you explaining clearly everything* [16:89]).

(13) Ibn Saʿd, Ibn al-Ḍurays (in his *al-Faḍāʾil*) and Ibn Marduwayh have narrated from ʿAmr b. Shuʿayb from his father from his grandfather: "The Messenger of God appeared before a group who were bandying arguments about the Qur'an, and he was very angry and said: 'This is how the nations before you went astray—they disputed with their prophets and hit one part of the book with the other.' Then he said: 'And verily the Qur'an has not been revealed so that its parts would contradict each other; rather, it has been revealed so that its part would confirm each other. Therefore, follow what you know (of it) and believe in what is ambiguous to you (from it):' " (*al-Durr al-manthūr*)

(14) Aḥmad has narrated in another way from ʿAmr b. Shuʿayb from his father from his grandfather that the Messenger of God heard some people disputing with one another. So, he said: "That is how those who were before you had perished; they hit one part of the Book of God over the other. And the Book of God has been revealed (and) its one part confirms the other; therefore, do not (try to) refute its one part with the other part. What you know of it, you should believe in it, and what you do not know of it, you should leave it to him who knows it." (*al-Durr al-manthūr*)

Author's comment: As you see, these traditions count "hitting one part of the Qur'an with the other" as opposite to "confirming some of its parts with the others." In other words, this "hitting" refers to confusing the meanings of the verses, disturbing their aims and objects, mistaking, for example, the decisive verses for the ambiguous ones and vice versa. It means that speaking in the Qur'an according to one's own opinion, and explaining the verses without knowledge (described in

earlier quoted traditions) and hitting some parts of the Qur'an with the others (mentioned in the above traditions) refer to one and the same thing, that is, explaining the Qur'an with the help of other than the Qur'an.

Question: No doubt, the Qur'an was revealed so, that the people may comprehend and understand it. See, for example, these two verses: *Surely We have revealed to you the Book with the truth for the sake of men …* (39:41); *This is a clear statement for men* (3:138).

Also there is no doubt that it was the Prophet who had the authority to explain it. As God says: … *and We have revealed to you the Reminder that you may make clear to men what has been revealed to them …* (16:44). And surely he explained it to his companions, who transmitted it to their disciples. What has come to us from the companions and their disciples is doubtlessly the explanation given by the Prophet, and we cannot disregard it, as the Qur'an tells us to follow what is given to us by the Prophet. As for those explanations which the companions gave us without ascribing them to the Prophet, it is true that they cannot have the same authority as the Prophet's declarations; yet we feel more at ease with them (instead of looking for them on our own). Why? Because either they had heard it from the Prophet, or they were led to it by their expertise in religion—the expertise they had acquired from the Prophet's instruction and exposition. The same applies to their disciples and the disciples' disciples. Surely the meaning of the Qur'an could not be hidden from them—they had deep rooted knowledge of Arabic language; they were keen on learning the Qur'anic interpretation from the Prophet himself; and they strived their utmost to acquire the knowledge of religion. All this may be seen in biographical details of the early scholars of religion.

Looking at the above-mentioned details, we come to the conclusion that deviating from their method and tradition, going out of their company or explaining any verse in a way that is not found in their opinions and sayings, is an innovation; and that one must remain silent where they have not given any opinion.

What the companions and their direct and indirect disciples have said is enough for the purpose of understanding the Qur'an. There are thousands of traditions on exegesis, and al-Suyūṭī has counted some seventeen thousand traditions on this subject, narrated from the

Prophet and his companions and their disciples.

Reply: Its reply may be inferred from what we have written earlier. There are numerous verses which invite the public in general, the believers as well as the unbelievers, those who were present at the time of revelation as well as those who came later or shall come in future, to understand the Qur'an and meditate and ponder on it. For example, see the verse 4:82 which has been quoted repeatedly: *Do they not then meditate on the Qur'an? And if it were from any other than Allah, they would have found in it many a discrepancy.* It clearly shows that the Qur'anic knowledge may be acquired through meditation and contemplation; and that by this process the apparent discrepancy between the verses disappears completely. Remember that this verse puts a challenge to unbelievers that they would not find any discrepancy in the Qur'an if they pondered on it. And in this context they could not be advised to go to the companions and their disciples if they wanted to understand its meaning; nay, even the advice to refer to the Prophet would have been irrelevant: If the Prophet's explanation were in conformity with the apparent meaning of the verse, then people would understand that meaning from the verse itself on meditation and contemplation—and there would be no need to refer to the Prophet. And if his explanation were against the apparent meaning of the Qur'an—a meaning that an average man would not understand from the words—then the challenge would be futile and the argument of the verse 4:82 would not stand.

Of course, so far as the details of various Qur'anic laws are concerned, they cannot be known without the Prophet's explanation, as the Qur'an itself says: … *and whatever the Messenger gives you, take it, and from whatever he forbids you, keep back …* (59:7). Also, the details of the Qur'anic stories and of the Day of Judgment depend on his exposition.

It shows that the Prophet's responsibility, in this respect, was of teaching only. A teacher guides and helps his student in understanding what would be difficult to comprehend without his help. The teaching brings the meaning nearer to the mind; it does not create a meaning. The teacher arranges the subject matter to make it easier to comprehend, so that the student is not obliged to waste his time and energy in self-education—a proposition that carries with it a risk of wrong deductions. This aspect of the Prophet's responsibilities is mentioned in many verses. For example, … *and We have revealed to you the Reminder*

that you may make clear to men what has been revealed to them, and that haply they may reflect (16:44) …; *And teaches them the Book and the Wisdom …* (62:2). The Prophet, therefore, teaches the people what the Qur'an itself says and the Divine Speech itself shows, and which the people themselves may understand even if it requires some meditation. It is not the Prophet's function to bestow on the verses such meanings as cannot be normally understood from those words. Such an explanation would not conform with the following Qur'anic declarations: *A Book of which the verses are made plain, an Arabic Qur'an for a people who know* (41:3); *… and this is clear Arabic language* (16:103).

Then there are the traditions of the Prophet exhorting the Muslims to hold fast to the Qur'an and to verify with its help the traditions attributed to him. It necessarily follows that all what the Prophet has said may be known from the Qur'an. Otherwise, he could not tell us to check with it all the sayings attributed to him.

Now, if we say that understanding of the Qur'an depends on the Prophet's explanation, it would be a vicious circle. The Qur'an would be understood only if explained by the traditions, but the authenticity of the tradition could be established only if one understands the Qur'an.

Now we come to the traditions narrated from the companions. First, we are faced with the problems concerning the chains of the narrators, because not all of them are free from one or the other defect. Second, the companions have differed a great deal with one another in their expositions of the Qur'an. Third, in many cases, divergent views have been ascribed to a single companion, as anyone may find out by looking in the books of traditions and exegesis. What is one supposed to do when faced with such discrepancies? We are told by these people that we should choose one of those diverse opinions and stick to it; that we should not destroy the "composite unanimity" of the companions, nor should we go outside their circle. But the trouble is that the companions themselves were not averse to differ from each other; then why should we not differ from them? They themselves never claimed that their opinions were vested with an authority which others were duty bound to accept; nor did they ever say that, although they differed from one another, others should not differ from them.

If we were stuck up with the Qur'anic exegesis narrated from the companions and their disciples, the forward march of knowledge

would be arrested and academic research negated. Look at the explanations transmitted to us from the early scholars, and study the books of exegesis written in early centuries. You will find that they contain only simple word meanings, and are devoid of deep thoughts and fine ideas. If we stop at those explanations, where we can find the vast and deep knowledge mentioned in the verse: … *and We have revealed the Book to you explaining clearly everything* … (16:89).

Then it is said that it is unthinkable that the companions did not know the meaning of the Qur'an, in spite of their keen interest in religious knowledge and their understanding and serious efforts in this way. But the very discrepancy in their various explanations belies this argument. Discrepancy and difference could not occur unless the truth was hidden from their eyes, and unless they were confused.

The truth is that the highway to the understanding of the Qur'an is wide open; and the Divine Speech itself leads one to its own understanding; it does not depend, for this purpose, on any other guide. It is a Book introduced by God as the guidance, the light and the clear explanation of everything. It cannot be said to need another guide, to seek illumination from another light or to depend on an outside factor for its own explanation.

Question: The correct traditions say that the Prophet said in his last sermon: "Certainly I am leaving among you two weighty things: The bigger one and the smaller one. As for the bigger one, it is the Book of God; and as for the smaller one, it is my progeny, the people of my house. Therefore, keep me in mind about these two things; because you shall never go astray so long as you hold fast to them." This tradition has been narrated by both sects from a great many companions of the Messenger of God; it has come to us through so many chains that one can entertain no doubt about its authenticity. The traditionalists have counted that it has been narrated by thirty-five companions. Some narrations contain the sentence: "They shall not separate from one another till they come to me on the reservoir (that is, *Kawthar*)." This tradition proves that the words of Ahl al-Bayt on the Qur'an are a binding authority and that one must adhere to what has come down to us from them concerning the exegesis. Otherwise, one would be guilty of separating the Qur'an from the Ahl al-Bayt.

Reply: What was said earlier regarding the explanation of the

Prophet applies here too. The tradition quoted in the question is not intended to negate the authority of the apparent meaning of the Qur'an, nor does it say that the exegesis given by the Ahl al-Bayt is the only authoritative explanation. The Prophet has used the words, "they shall not separate from one another." It means that authority belongs to the Qur'an and the Ahl al-Bayt together; the Qur'an explains its meaning and makes manifest the Divine realities, and the Ahl al-Bayt guide to the true path and direct the people to the Qur'anic aims and goals.

Moreover, like the Prophet, the Ahl al-Bayt too have directed the Muslims to hold fast to the Qur'an, to meditate on it and to verify from it the traditions attributed to them.

Furthermore, a considerable number of the exegetical traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt themselves have used the method of explaining a verse with the help of the other. This method can be meaningful only if the Qur'anic verses may be understandable to an average man—provided the correct direction is followed.

Apart from these rational arguments, some traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt explicitly mention this fact. al-Barqī has narrated through his chains from Abū Labīd that Abū Jaʿfar said in a tradition: "Whoever thought that the Book of God was vague, fell in perdition and destroyed others." Another tradition has been narrated in the same book as well as in *al-Iḥtijāj* that Abū Jaʿfar said: "When I narrate to you anything, you should ask me where it was in the Book of God …"

The above discourse makes it clear that there is no conflict between those traditions which say that the Qur'anic knowledge is not unintelligible and that it may be understood with the help of the Qur'anic verses themselves, and those which are apparently against it. For example, it is narrated in *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* from Jābir that he said: "Abū ʿAbdillāh said: 'Verily, the Qur'an has an interior, and for its interior there is an exterior.' Then he said: 'O Jābir! and there is nothing farther from the understanding of the men than it (that is, the Qur'an). Verily, a verse, its first (part) is revealed about one subject and its middle (part) about another thing, and its end about something else; and yet it is a well-connected speech, (that) revolves in various ways.' " This theme has been given in various other traditions. In some of them, the sentence, "and there is nothing farther from the understanding of the men …," has been ascribed to the Prophet. Also, ʿAlī is reported as saying: "Verily,

the Qur'an may be explained in many ways; it has many faces …"

It is clear that what has been allowed, nay, encouraged, is explaining it through its own path, and what has been forbidden is explaining it through another path. The prescribed way is exegesis of the Qur'an with the help of the Qur'an itself, explaining a verse with another verse. A man can do so only when he is well-versed in the traditions of the Prophet and his Ahl al-Bayt; it gives him correct perspective and creates in him a discriminating taste. It is after acquiring this taste that one may explain the Qur'an with confidence. And God is the best Guide.

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Verses 10-18

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَنْ تُغْنِيَ عَنْهُمْ أَمْوَالُهُمْ وَلَا أَوْلَادُهُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ شَيْئًا ۖ وَأُولَٰئِكَ
هُمْ وَقُودُ النَّارِ ﴿١٠﴾ كَدَأْبِ آلِ فِرْعَوْنَ وَالَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا فَأَخَذَهُمُ
اللَّهُ بِذُنُوبِهِمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ شَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ ﴿١١﴾ قُلْ لِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا سَتُغْلَبُونَ وَتُحْشَرُونَ
إِلَىٰ جَهَنَّمَ ۚ وَبِئْسَ الْمِهَادُ ﴿١٢﴾ قَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ آيَةٌ فِي فِئَتَيْنِ الْتَقَتَا ۖ فِئَةٌ تُقَاتِلُ فِي
سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَأُخْرَىٰ كَافِرَةٌ يَرَوْنَهُمْ مِثْلَيْهِمْ رَأْيَ الْعَيْنِ ۚ وَاللَّهُ يُؤَيِّدُ بِنَصْرِهِ مَنْ
يَشَاءُ ۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَعِبْرَةً لِأُولِي الْأَبْصَارِ ﴿١٣﴾ زُيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ حُبُّ الشَّهَوَاتِ مِنَ
النِّسَاءِ وَالْبَنِينَ وَالْقَنَاطِيرِ الْمُقَنْطَرَةِ مِنَ الذَّهَبِ وَالْفِضَّةِ وَالْخَيْلِ الْمُسَوَّمَةِ
وَالْأَنْعَامِ وَالْحَرْثِ ۗ ذَٰلِكَ مَتَاعُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا ۖ وَاللَّهُ عِنْدَهُ حُسْنُ الْمَآبِ ﴿١٤﴾ قُلْ
أَؤُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِخَيْرٍ مِنْ ذَٰلِكُمْ ۚ لِلَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ جَنَّاتٌ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا
الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا وَأَزْوَاجٌ مُطَهَّرَةٌ وَرِضْوَانٌ مِنَ اللَّهِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ بَصِيرٌ بِالْعِبَادِ ﴿١٥﴾
الَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا إِنَّنَا آمَنَّا فَاغْفِرْ لَنَا ذُنُوبَنَا وَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ ﴿١٦﴾ الصَّابِرِينَ
وَالصَّادِقِينَ وَالْقَانِتِينَ وَالْمُنْفِقِينَ وَالْمُسْتَغْفِرِينَ بِالْأَسْحَارِ ﴿١٧﴾ شَهِدَ اللَّهُ أَنَّهُ لَا
إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ وَأُولُو الْعِلْمِ قَائِمًا بِالْقِسْطِ ۚ لَا إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ
الْحَكِيمُ ﴿١٨﴾

(3:10) *[As for] those who disbelieve, surely neither their wealth nor their children shall avail them in the least against Allah, and those it is who are the fuel of the fire.*

(3:11) *Like the wont of the people of Pharaoh and those before them; they rejected Our signs, so Allah caught them for their sins; and Allah is severe in requiting [evil].*

(3:12) *Say to those who disbelieve: You shall be vanquished, and gathered to hell; and wretched is [it as] the resting place.*

(3:13) *Indeed there was a sign in the two hosts [which] met together in encounter; one party fighting in the way of Allah and the other unbelieving; they saw them twice their number with the sight of the eye; and Allah aids with His aid whom He pleases; most surely there is a lesson in this for those who have sight.*

(3:14) *It has been made to seem fair to men, the love of desires of women and sons and hoarded treasures of gold and silver and well-bred horses and cattle and tilth; this is the provision of the life of this world; and Allah is He with Whom is the best destination.*

(3:15) *Say: Shall I tell you of what is better than these? For those who guard [against evil] are gardens with their Lord, beneath which rivers flow, to .abide in them, and pure mates and Allah's pleasure; and Allah sees the servants.*

(3:16) *Those who say: Our Lord! surely we believe, therefore forgive us our sins and save us from the chastisement of the fire.*

(3:17) *The patient, and the truthful, and the devout [ones] and those who spend [benevolently] and those who ask for forgiveness before dawn.*

(3:18) *Allah bears witness that there is no god but He, and [so do] the angels and those possessed of knowledge, maintaining [His creation] with justice; there is no god but He, the Mighty, the Wise.*

Introduction

It was described earlier that when this chapter was revealed, the Muslims were hard-pressed by internal sabotage and external hostilities. There were inside Medina the hypocrites and their informants, who listened to, and spread the evil whisperings of, the enemies of Islam to upset the Muslims' programmes and make their efforts ineffective. And almost the whole Arabia and the two most powerful neighboring empires were bent upon their annihilation. The polytheists, the Jews and the Christians, all were united in their determination to kill Islam in its infancy with all possible means—by words or by swords. This chapter was revealed to exhort the Muslims to remain united, firm and patient. These qualities would keep their society healthy, eradicate the internal troubles and confound the external enemies.

The preceding verses had mentioned the hypocrites' perversity, and exhorted the Muslims to faithfully follow what they had learned

of the realities of religion, and to surrender themselves to, and believe in, what they do not understand of the Qur'an. The verses warned the Muslims not to follow the ambiguous parts of the Qur'an, seeking to give them their own interpretation; otherwise, their well-balanced religion would be distorted and they themselves would fall into perdition. In this way, they would be deprived of their felicity; their religious guidance would give way to misguidance, and their unity would turn into disunity.

Now, these verses turn to the unbelievers and polytheists. These infidels will soon be vanquished; they cannot defeat the purpose of the Almighty God, nor can they triumph in their rebellion. What has misled them into straying is their entanglement with inordinate pleasures of this world. They think that their riches and their children can make them independent of God; but they are mistaken in their thinking; because God is predominant in His affairs. If wealth and man-power could make anyone independent of God, they would have saved the people of Pharaoh and other unjust nations in the past, who had acquired much more power and strength. But God caught them for their sins and they could do nothing. Likewise, these enemies of Divine religion would soon be vanquished. Therefore, the Muslims should remain on guard; they should not fall victim of these desires and pleasures. If they followed this guidance, they would get felicity in this world and eternal reward in the next—and, of course, the pleasure of their Lord is the greatest reward.

In short, these verses are mainly concerned with the affairs of the unbelievers. (With verses coming after these begin the comment on the People of the Book).

Commentary

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَنْ تُغْنِيَ عَنْهُمْ أَمْوَالُهُمْ وَلَا أَوْلَادُهُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ شَيْئًا ۖ وَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمْ وَقُودُ النَّارِ ﴿١٠﴾

(3:10) ***[As for] those who disbelieve, surely neither their wealth nor their children shall avail them in the least against Allah, and those it is who are the fuel of the fire.***

That is, their wealth and children shall not make them independent

of God.

Man's first instinctive awareness is of his dependence on others. This instinct guides him to his Maker and Sustainer. Looking at intermediate causes he, first of all, realizes that for the development and perfection of his body he depends on food and children. Then his attention is drawn to other animal perfections like fancy attire, comfortable abode, attractive spouse and things like that. At this stage, the desire of food changes into that of wealth and property, because he thinks that wealth is the panacea of all difficulties of life. Now he believes that the felicity of his life comes from wealth and children; in other words, wealth replaces food. At this stage his short-sightedness prevents him from seeing beyond these intermediate causes; he thinks that they are independent causes and forgets his Lord. His heart becomes inseparably attached to wealth and children; and this ignorance leads him to perdition. He fails to see the signs of his Lord and disbelieves in them. He does not realize that his lord is God besides Whom there is no god, the Ever-living, the Self-subsisting; nothing can ever be independent of Him; nothing can ever avail against Him.

The above explanation also makes it clear why the verse has given precedence to wealth over children—man's dependence on wealth (or food, a kind of wealth) precedes his dependence on children—although at times his love for children overpowers his lust for wealth.

The verse seems to have abridged a long sentence. Its full import is as follows: Those who disbelieve have rejected Our signs and they think that their wealth and their children will avail them against God; but they are mistaken, because nothing can ever avail anyone against God.

… and those it is who are the fuel of the fire: *al-Waqūd* is fuel; that which feeds a fire and inflames it. The verse runs on the line of the following two: *… then be on guard against the fire of which men and stones are the fuel …* (2:24); *Surely you and what you worship besides Allah are the firewood of hell …* (21:98).

This subject has been explained to some extent in the Chapter of the Cow.

This sentence has many devices that are used for restriction: It is an *al-jumlat al-ismiyyah* (nominal sentence; a sentence that begins with noun or pronoun); it begins with a demonstrative pronoun and uses a pronoun that points to a distant object; has inserted a second

disjunctive personal pronoun between the subject and the predicate; and has added the words "of fire" after the word, "fuel"—all these things clearly show that only the unbelievers are the fuel of the fire; they are the basic source of the chastisement; they are the fuel that keeps the hell burning; others will burn in the flames that will be fuelled with the unbelievers: The verse 8:37 points to this fact: *That Allah may separate the impure from the pure, and put the impure, some of it upon the other, and pile it up together, then cast it into hell …*

كَدَأْبِ آلِ فِرْعَوْنَ وَالَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا فَأَخَذَهُمُ اللَّهُ بِذُنُوبِهِمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ شَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ ﴿١١﴾

(3:11) ***Like the wont of the people of Pharaoh and those before them; they rejected Our signs, so Allah caught them for their sins; and Allah is severe in requiting [evil].***

al-Daʾb is continuing movement. God has said: *And He has made subservient to you the sun and the moon pursuing their courses …* (14:33). Thereupon the word was used for habit, custom or wont, because that also is a perpetual movement. In this verse, it has been used in this latter meaning.

Like the wont … is related to a deleted sentence which may be understood from the phrase, "shall not avail them"; "the wont" is explained by the words, *they rejected Our signs*. Thus, the complete sentence would be as follows: Those who disbelieve have rejected Our signs and continued on this habit unfailingly; they think that their wealth and their children will avail them against God; it is like the wont of the people of Pharaoh and those before them, who also had rejected Our signs. "So God caught them *bi-dhunūbihim* for their sins." *bi* (translated here as "for") apparently shows the reason; in other words, God caught them because of their sins. But the two verses stand face to face comparing the condition of these unbelievers with that of the people of Pharaoh and those who lived before them. It strongly suggests that *bi* here points to the instrument of this catching. The unbelievers are the fuel of the fire, which shall burn them and they shall get the punishment by their own fire. Likewise, the people of Pharaoh and those who were before them were caught by their own sins; the chastisement meted out to them was another form of their own misdeeds; it was

their own evil plan which surrounded them, their own injustice and oppression that destroyed them. God says: … *and the evil plan does not beset any save the authors of it* (35:43); … *and they did not do Us any harm, but they did harm their own selves* (2:57).

The above explanation makes the meaning of the next sentence clearer: *and God is severe in requiting [evil]*. The chastisement meted out by God is not confined to one direction, one place or one state. When a man punishes another man, his punishment comes from only a certain direction, for example, from above or below and so on, and at one place, not at the others. The man so punished may run away from that particular place, or may shield himself against that particular direction. But the Divine chastisement is all-encompassing. He catches a man by the misdeeds and sins committed by that man himself; his action is always with him, in his exterior as well as in his interior; it does never separate from him. That sin turns its doer into a fuel of the fire, a fire that surrounds not only all sides of his exterior but permeates even his inner self; he cannot save himself by running away; nor can he benefit from standing still; there is neither any shelter nor any refuge against it. That is why God is called "severe in requiting evil."

First, the verse mentioned the Divine name in the third person (God), then it was changed into the first person (Our signs), again it was reverted to the original third person (God caught). This change in the middle of the sentence serves two purposes: It freshens the mind and puts more emphasis on the truth of the proposition. Suppose someone says: "That man is foul-mouthed and uses obscene language; and I myself have experienced his indecent manner; therefore, you should avoid his company." The sentence, "I myself have experienced his indecent manner," confirms the preceding information of his obscenity, by turning the news into experience and into a sort of testimony.

The import of the verse then would be—and God knows better—something like this: The people of Pharaoh had the same traits as these unbelievers have. They disbelieved and rejected Our signs. There is no doubt at all about it, as We were present there and yet they rejected Our own signs, so We caught them.

When this purpose was served, the pronouns were again changed to the third person. This reversion also served two purposes: It puts the sentence on the original track and brought into focus the great and

all-encompassing Divine authority and power. The name, God, brings to mind the fact that He has all the world's affairs in His Own hands and looks after every big and small thing. It was not difficult for Him to catch the disbelievers for their sins.

And that is why the name has been repeated in the next sentence. It says, *and God is severe in requiting*, instead of saying, "and He is severe …" The name draws attention to the fact that their disbelief and their rejection of the signs was nothing but a rebellion against Almighty God; and it is easy for Him to catch the offenders and give them severe punishment, because He is God.

قُلْ لِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا سَتُغْلَبُونَ وَتُحْشَرُونَ إِلَىٰ جَهَنَّمَ ۚ وَبِئْسَ الْمِهَادُ ﴿١٢﴾

(3:12) ***Say to those who disbelieve: You shall be vanquished, and gathered to hell; and wretched is [it as] the resting place.***

al-Ḥashr is to force a group out from their abode. It is never used with a singular object. God says:... *and We will gather them and leave not any one of them behind* (18:47). *al-Mihād* literally means bed.

The context proves that "those who disbelieve" refers to the polytheists, because in the first verse also this phrase has been used for the same group, and not for the People of the Book. Both verses are inter-related—the previous one mentioned that they put their confidence in wealth and children and sought strength from them; and this one says that they shall surely be vanquished and shall all be driven together to the hell.

قَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ آيَةٌ فِي فِئَتَيْنِ الْتَقَتَا ۖ فِئَةٌ تُقَاتِلُ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَأُخْرَىٰ كَافِرَةٌ يَرَوْنَهُمْ مِثْلَيْهِمْ رَأْيَ الْعَيْنِ ۚ وَاللَّهُ يُؤَيِّدُ بِنَصْرِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ ۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَعِبْرَةً لِأُولِي الْأَبْصَارِ ﴿١٣﴾

(3:13) ***Indeed there was a sign in the two hosts [which] met together in encounter; one party fighting in the way of Allah and the other unbelieving; they saw them twice their number with the sight of the eye; and Allah aids with His aid whom He pleases; most surely there is a lesson in this for those who have sight.***

The context shows that this verse also is addressed to "those who disbelieve"; that it is the continuation of the preceding verse which told

the Prophet to tell the unbelievers that they would be vanquished. There is also another possibility: It may have been addressed to the believers, inviting them to ponder on the grace of God bestowed on them on the day of Badr. He helped them with His wonderful aid by affecting the sights of the eyes in a previously unheard of way. If this explanation is accepted then this verse enlarges the circle of audience—the preceding ones were addressed to the Prophet only, but this one includes the believers too. But the first explanation is more appropriate.

The verse does not name the event to which it refers; but the description fits on the battle of Badr. This chapter was revealed after the battle of Badr, or even Uḥud. The style shows that the event referred to was well-known to the audience who knew it with all its particulars. It was only in the battle of Badr that God affected the visions of the participants. In Chapter 8, this phenomenon has been described in the following words: *And when He showed them to you, when you met, as few in your eyes, and He reduced you to appear as few in their eyes, in order that Allah might bring about a matter which was to be done; and to Allah are returned all affairs* (8:44). But this verse mentions reducing them to appear as few; while the verse under discussion talks about showing them as twice their number. Probably, God made the believers appear as few in the eyes of the polytheists, so that the enemies of Islam would feel bold to attack the believers and would not abandon the thought of fighting; then after the start of the encounter, He made them appear as twice their number, so that the enemies would flee away and be vanquished.

In any case, if the verse is addressed, through the Prophet to the polytheists, it does not fit except the battle of Badr. (Some reciters have recited, "you saw them," instead of "they saw them"; this recitation also supports the above-given explanation.)

What the verse says is this: O polytheists! if you have any wisdom, then what you saw on the day of Badr should be enough to convince you that victory belongs to the truth, that God helps by His aid whom He wishes, and that He cannot be overpowered by wealth or children. The believers, on that day, were fighting in the way of God: they were a small and weak band, not even one-third of the army of the unbelievers; and their strength was not even worthy of comparison with that of the unbelievers; the Muslims were only three hundred and thirteen

souls, their armament and provision amounting to a grand total of six coats of mail, eight swords and two horses. And the army of the polytheists consisted of nearly one thousand warriors, their provisions, strength, horses, camels and other preparations were beyond estimate. But God helped the believers, in spite of their small number and weaknesses, over His enemies; He made the Muslims appear twice their actual number, in the eyes of the polytheists; and the angels were sent to help the believers. The polytheists, who thought that their wealth and children would make them strong and victorious, were destroyed; and their great multitude and overwhelming material strength proved totally ineffective against God.

The wont of the people of Pharaoh and those who were before them—their rejecting the Divine signs and being caught by God for their sins—has been repeated twice in Chapter 8.

The polytheists have been admonished and reminded of the events of Badr. It is a hint that the victory of the Muslims mentioned in the preceding verse is the victory by killing and destroying the enemies. These verses, therefore, threaten the polytheists of fighting.

… one party fighting in the way of Allah and the other unbelieving: God did not say, "and the other in the way of Satan," or, "in the way of false deities" and so on. The talk is not concerned with comparison between the two ways; its main purport is to show that nothing can be independent of God; that nothing can avail against Him; and that the victory belongs to Him. The comparison is, thus, between the belief in God and fighting in His way on one hand and disbelieving in God on the other.

It appears from the context that the pronouns, "them" and "their," in the phrase, "they saw them twice their number" stand for the phrase, "one party fighting in the way of God." In other words, it says that the unbelieving party saw the believers twice the actual number of the believers, that is, the believers appeared in their eyes as six hundred and twenty-six (instead of the three hundred and thirteen). The words do not support the idea that the two pronouns stood for the two groups separately. In other words, the verse does not say that the unbelievers saw the believers twice the number of the unbelievers themselves.

Someone has mentioned another possibility: That both pronouns stood for the unbelieving party, and that the unbelievers saw themselves

twice their own actual number, and instead of one thousand they saw themselves as two thousand. In this way, they saw the believers even smaller in proportion than they actually were; three hundred and thirteen is less than one-sixth of two thousand, while the believers were in fact about one-third of the enemies. It would also explain the verse 8:44 mentioned earlier: *And when He showed them to you, when you met, as few in your eyes, and He reduced you to appear as few in their eyes* … Without this explanation the two verses would appear contradictory to each other.

Reply: If God wanted to say what has been suggested above, it was necessary to say clearly, "they saw themselves twice their own number." To express this idea in the present form (*they saw them twice their number*) creates confusion, which is unworthy of an eloquent talk. Also, it is wrong to think that this verse appears contradictory to the verse 8:44. To show contradiction, one would have to prove that both verses refer to the same time and the same situation. But it cannot be done. Probably, God made each group appear, as fewer than their actual number, in the eyes of the opposite party; it made them bold to attack and start fighting. Then, after the battle waxed hot and the opposing forces raged into each other, God made the unbelievers see the believers twice their actual number, and they lost their heart, were demoralized and fled away. So, where is the supposed discrepancy?

This case is similar to the two verses describing the affairs of the Day of Resurrection: *So on that day neither man nor jinn shall be asked about his sin* (55:39); *And stop them, for they shall be questioned* (37:24). There is no conflict here because each verse is about a different time and stage.

Some other exegetes have written some other views about the two pronouns; but as all of them are against the apparent meaning of the word, there is no use of quoting them here.

… and Allah aids with His aid whom He pleases; most surely there is a lesson in this for those who have sight: *al-Taʾyīd* (to strengthen) is derived from *al-ayd* (strength). *al-Abṣār* is sight. Some people say that here it refers to the eyes, because the verse describes how God influenced their eye-sight. Others say that it means wisdom and knowledge, because it is through them that one may take lesson from some event. But this controversy is misplaced, because God counts him who does not take

lesson from events and parables as blind; and says that eyes must see and differentiate the truth from falsehood. It is a sort of claim that the truth, to which God invites all His creatures, is a manifest, embodied substance which is within the perception of these physical eyes. In short, the body's eye and the mind's eye are treated as one (metaphorically, of course) so far as comprehension of spiritual knowledge is concerned, because this knowledge is open for all to see. This theme is found in many verses, some of which are as follows: *For surely it is not the eyes that become blind, but blind become the hearts which are in the breasts* (22:46). In other words, the eyes are in the breasts, not in the heads: … *and they have eyes which they do not see with …* (7:179). This verse shows astonishment at their being blind to the truth: … *and put a covering upon his eyes* (45:23).

All of it shows that "sight" in this verse refers to the manifest eyes; this expression is based on an implied claim that it is these eyes that see the truth and take lesson from the past experience. It is a fine example of *al-istiʿāratu bi al-kināyah* (a simile which contains neither the first or second side nor its particle—instead it mentions only a concomitant of the second side in order to hint at the allegory). Its import is to show that truth is such a manifest substance that it may be seen by these eyes. What has enhanced further the beauty of this expression is the context—the verse describes the effect the Divine decree had on their eyesights.

Obviously, the sentence, "most surely there is a lesson in this for those who have sight," is not a part of the talk which the Prophet was to address to the unbelievers (*Say to those who disbelieve …*). It is addressed to the Prophet himself. Its proof is the singular second person pronoun *ka* (thou) added as suffix in *dhālika* (this). It is an indication that the unbelievers are so blind of hearts that they cannot take lesson from past events; therefore, they are not worthy of any advice.

زُيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ حُبُّ الشَّهَوَاتِ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ وَالْبَنِينَ وَالْقَنَاطِيرِ الْمُقَنْطَرَةِ مِنَ الذَّهَبِ
وَالْفِضَّةِ وَالْخَيْلِ الْمُسَوَّمَةِ وَالْأَنْعَامِ وَالْحَرْثِ ۗ ذَٰلِكَ مَتَاعُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا ۖ وَاللَّهُ
عِنْدَهُ حُسْنُ الْمَآبِ ﴿١٤﴾

(3:14) ***It has been made to seem fair to men, the love of desires of women and sons and hoarded treasures of gold and silver and well-bred***

horses and cattle and tilth; this is the provision of the life of this world; and Allah is He with Whom is the best destination.

This and the following verses elaborate the preceding ones (As for those who disbelieve surely neither their wealth nor their children shall avail them in the least against God …). The unbelievers erroneously thought that these things would make them independent of God. Now, this verse explains the reason of their mistaken idea: They have submerged their souls under the love of these worldly materials and are so overwhelmed with them that they have forgotten the life hereafter. But they are mistaken, because these things are just the provisions of this transient life, their only purpose is to pave the way for the next destination that is with God. These people are oblivious of the reality of this worldly provision: God has ingrained in human nature the love of these fair and beautiful items, so that this worldly life may attain its completion and perfection. Without this inclination, continuity of human race would be endangered. It is through this love and desire that the decree of God is enforced: … *and there is for you in the earth an abode and a provision for a time* (2:36). God created in man this inclination, so that he may use it as a means to reach his final destination; so that he may take from it what would benefit him in the next life. People were not expected to treat these worldly trinkets as permanent things, or to forget what lies ahead. They are on journey, going forward to their Lord; they should not take the path as the destination. God says: *Surely We have made whatever is on the earth an embellishment for it, so that We may try them [as to] which of them is best in deed. And most surely We will make what is on it bare ground without herbage* (18:7-8).

But these simpletons thought that these apparent causes of worldly pleasure were independent of God, (while actually they were created by God to be a means to obtain the pleasure of God). Instead, the unbelievers thought that these things would avail them against God. By their behavior, they turned the bliss into misery, and changed the reward into punishment. God says: *The likeness of this world's life is only as water which We sent down from the sky; by its mingling the herbage of the earth of which men and cattle eat grows; until when the earth puts on its golden raiment and it becomes garnished, and its people think that they have power over it, Our command comes to it, by night or by day, so*

We render it as reaped, as though it had not been in existence yesterday; … And on the day when We will gather them all together, then We will say to those who associated others [with God]; Keep where you are, you and your associates; then We shall separate them widely one from another … and they shall be brought back to Allah, their true Master, and what they did fabricate shall escape from them (10:24-30). These verses show that the life and its adornments are in the hands of God; none but He controls them. Man, in his foolishness, is deceived by its appearance and thinks that he is in control of his own affair, and that it is he who manages it and keeps it in order. He ascribes some associates in it, like idols and things like idols (wealth and children and so on). But God will make him aware of his follies; the embellishments will go away, the relationship between him and his associates will be cut off, and all that man had fabricated against God will be lost to him. Then he will understand that what he was admonished with in this world was true. Alas! understanding at that time when he will be returned to his Lord, will not benefit him at all.

God says: *It has been made to seem fair to men the love of desires …* The question is: Who has made it to look fair to man? The world appears before man's eyes as a beautiful and adorable thing—it shows the elegance of independence and beauty of purpose. Does God make it appear in this light? Reason says, No. The All-knowing Wise Lord is too great to manage a thing in such a way that it would defeat His Own purpose. He says: … *surely Allah attains His purpose* (65:3); *and Allah is predominant over His affair* (12:21). If this phenomenon is to be attributed at all, it should be attributed to Satan. God says: … *and Satan made what they did fair-seeming to them* (6:43). *And when Satan made their deeds fair-seeming to them …* (8:48).

Of course, it is all according to the system decreed by God. He has given the man freedom of will to choose his own path, and God does not interfere in the man's choice. This system is called "permission," it is so that the test may be conducted, and so that the spiritual training may progress in a just manner. God says: *Do men think that they will be left alone on saying, We believe, and not be tried? And certainly We tried those before them, so Allah will certainly know those who are true and He will certainly know the liars. Or do they who work evil think that they will escape Us? Evil is it that they judge* (29:2-4).

There is a verse in which this "making fair-seeming" has been attributed to God: *Thus have We made fair-seeming to every people their deeds* (6:108). This verse may be explained by the above-mentioned system of "permission." It may also be explained in the light of the previously explained verse: *Surely We have made whatever is on the earth an embellishment for it, so that We may try them [as to] which of them is best in deed* (18:7).

This "making fair-seeming" is of two kinds. First, world and worldly embellishments are made fair-seeming to man so that he may use it wisely—to get happiness in the next world, and to seek the pleasure of God in all his actions through this wealth, honor, children and self. It is a good and divinely inspired characteristic and God has attributed it to Himself in the verse 18:7 (*Surely We have made whatever is on the earth an embellishment …*), and in other verses mentioned earlier. Also the following verse refers to this reality: *Say: Who has prohibited the embellishment of Allah which He has brought forth for His servants and the good provisions?* (7:32).

Second, the world is made to appear lovely in the eyes of man, to ensnare his heart, so that he may forget his Creator. It is an evil plan which God has attributed to Satan, and admonished His servants to remain on guard against it. For example: *… and Satan made what they did fair-seeming to them …* (6:43); *He [Satan] said: My Lord! because Thou hast left me to stray, I will certainly make [evil] fair-seeming to them on earth, and I will certainly cause them all to go astray …* (15:39); *… the evil of their doings is made fair-seeming to them …* (9:37), and so on.

Sometimes even this type of "making fair-seeming" is attributed to God, inasmuch as Satan and all other causes of good and evil do whatever they do only because God has given them the "permission" (as explained above). This system was necessary to attain the Divine purpose of test, in order that the doers of good may succeed because of their good intention and choice; and the sinners may be separated from them.

The above explanation makes it clear that it is not God who has made it seem fair to men the love of various desires mentioned in the verse under discussion. No doubt, every "making fair-seeming" may be attributed to God, either directly, (if it is a good adornment leading man to His worship) or indirectly, that is, by permission (if it makes

one to forget one's Creator). But this verse contains some factors which cannot be attributed to God directly. Therefore, it was in keeping with the good manners of the Qur'an not to attribute this adornment to God; instead, it attributes it to some unspecified agent—it could be either Satan or the man himself.

An exegete has rightly said that the implied doer of the verb, "It has been made to seem fair," is Satan, because the love of desires is not a likeable trait, nor is the love of excessive wealth; and therefore, it cannot be attributed to God. God has attributed to Himself the good things mentioned at the end of this verse and in the next one.

But another commentator has said that it cannot be attributed to Satan. He says:

> "The matters related to the human nature and its love and inclinations can never be ascribed to Satan; what may be attributed to him is evil whispering that makes evil thoughts and deeds look attractive to man. He continues his argument as follows: The Qur'an has never attributed to Satan anything except making evil deed fair-seeming. God says: *And when Satan made their deeds fair-seeming to them* (8:48); … *and Satan made what they did fair-seeming to them* (6:43). But the Book does not attribute the realities and natures of the things except to the Wise Creator Who has no partner. God says: *Surely We have made whatever is on the earth an embellishment for it, so that We may try them [as to] which of them is best in deed* (18:7); *Thus have We made fair-seeming to every people their deeds* (6:108). The verse talks about the *people*, which is another way of talking about the nature of society."

Comment: He is right when he says that the realities and natures of things cannot be attributed to other than God. But he is mistaken in thinking that the verse speaks about the nature of man, or about his natural traits. This statement of ours may be understood if we look at the central theme of this chapter.

The main purpose of this chapter is to describe the following realities:

God is Self-subsisting by Whom all subsist: He manages all affairs of all His creatures; He creates them and looks after them. He guides them to their eternal bliss. Those who indulge in hypocrisy, reject His

signs or revolt against Him by differing in His Book—the hypocrites, the unbelievers, the polytheists and the People of the Book—in short, all those who obey Satan and follow their desires, cannot weaken the authority of God, nor can they overpower Him, nor is His all-encompassing management affected by their misbehavior. Everything, including the creatures' belief and disbelief, obedience and disobedience, is based on the system decreed by God. He has created in this world the systems of the cause and effect, and of the test and trial. He has created the nature, its properties and traits, its inclinations and actions. It has been done so that man may proceed forward to his Lord, may attain nearness to God and may get eternal honor in the Divine presence.

It was because of this system of test that He permitted Satan and did not prevent him from whispering into men's hearts and putting evil ideas into their minds. Nor did He prevent man from obeying Satan or following his own base desires. By this "permission" the test and trial remains free and fair; those who believe are distinguished from the disbelievers and the hypocrites; and the pure hearted servants of God are raised in status to become witnesses of God.

These things have been described in this chapter to give comfort to the believers. At that time they were overwhelmed by hardships and difficulties. Within their society, they had to endure the double-dealings of the hypocrites and ignorance of those with disease in their hearts. These two groups disturbed their plans and disrupted their affairs; as a result the commands given by God and His Messenger were not fully obeyed. On the outside, they were in constant danger from various groups. There were, within Arabia, the polytheists and the People of the Book (especially, the Jews); and the neighboring Romans and Persians were threatening them with all their might and forces. All those disbelievers were mistaken and confused in their ideas and ideals. They were entangled in this transient world and its embellishments; they thought that it was their goal and final destination. They had forgotten that this world was only a path, and the destination was the next world.

It is obvious that the chapter discusses the nature of the people, but in a wider framework that includes the purpose of their creation, and all that it entails, like the character and behavior, the good and evil deeds, the obedience and disobedience. It declares that all this is under the management of God, Who can never be defeated or

overpowered—neither in this world nor in the next. In this world, all things happen by His "permission," which makes the test meaningful. In the next world, all will be based on the principle of recompense—good for good and evil for evil.

The verses under discussion also were revealed with the same theme. The disbelievers were given those bounties in order that they might obtain with their help the pleasure of God and enter into His paradise. Instead, they rejected the signs of their Lord and changed those bounties into a source of eternal misfortune; they relied on those worldly embellishments; and thought that those things would avail them against God; in short, they were so enchanted by created things that they forgot the Creator. But these people cannot weaken the hold of God over them; they cannot overpower Him, nor can they escape from Him. God shall catch them for their sins, and shall help His believing servants against them. He shall gather all the disbelievers together unto hell and it is an evil abode. It is their greatest mistake to rely on that which is only a provision of this worldly life, and to forget that the best destination is with God.

These verses too speak about the nature of the disbelievers, but in a wider context that includes their good and bad deeds.

Therefore, it is wrong on the part of that exegete to think that, because the verse speaks about human nature, the verb, "It has been made to seem fair," cannot be attributed to other than God.

Further, he has offered the verse: "Thus have We made fair-seeming to every people their deeds," as a proof that realities can only be attributed to God, and it is only the deeds that may be attributed to Satan. But this verse clearly proves the opposite, because it attributes the deeds to God. Its context further strengthens this proposition. The complete verse is as follows: *And do not abuse those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest exceeding the limits they should abuse Allah out of ignorance. Thus have We made fair-seeming to every people their deeds; then to their Lord shall be their return, so He will inform them of what they did* (8:108). It makes clear what we have said.

Another exegete has said:

> "This 'making fair-seeming' is of two types: commendable and condemnable. Likewise, human actions are of two kinds: good and evil. Only that which is commendable, good and praiseworthy

can be attributed to God; and the other type is ascribed to Satan."

Comment: The above statement is correct to a certain extent—in so far as the direct attribution is concerned. In other word, it is valid about the direct actions of God. God does not do except good and He does not enjoin indecency and evil. But there is no reason why actions, other than the good and praiseworthy, should not be attributed to Him indirectly. In other words, God may "permit" His creatures to do good or evil as they like. They do whatever they do by the power given to them by God, and according to the system of test decreed by Him. And in this sense, all actions may be ascribed to God—indirectly, of course. If one says that some actions cannot be ascribed to God even indirectly, it would be difficult for him to believe that God is the Lord of everything, Creator of everything and Owner of everything, or that He has no partner or colleague in any affair at all. Moreover, the Qur'an contains many verses in which "unpraiseworthy" actions have been ascribed to God: *Allah makes whosoever He wills go astray* (13:27); … *Allah made their hearts turn aside* (61:5); *Allah mocks them and leaves them alone in their inordinacy* (2:15); … *We order the people of it who lead easy life, so they transgress therein* (17:16); there are many verses of this kind in the Qur'an.

What is the source of this erroneous ideas of people like that exegete? They looked at things and meditated on their mutual relationship, on their actions and their effects. They thought that every single thing has an independent existence, is separate from all surrounding things, and has no connection with things that have passed nor with those that are yet to appear.

God has decreed that every event should be a result of interaction of numerous causes. But these people put every thing and every event in a separate pigeonhole, unconnected with any other thing or event. According to their thinking, each event is related only to its immediate cause, and each action belongs only to its doer; other, distant causes have nothing to do with that event or action. Planets revolve, rivers flow, ships run, earth supports its inhabitants, vegetables grow, animals walk and man lives and strives: All these phenomena are separate from each other; there is no bond that binds them to one another; neither any metaphysical reality joins them together nor any physical force keeps them united.

Going a step further, they ascribed the same separateness to human actions and affairs. Virtue and evil, felicity and infelicity, guidance and misguidance, obedience and disobedience, benevolence and malevolence, justice and injustice, nothing is related to any other thing, nothing has any connection with anything else in its existence.

These people have overlooked the most obvious reality—that the universe, with all sorts of creatures and all kinds of components, is a single entity, whose parts are finely aligned together. Not only that—its components are often interchanged: Today it is a human being, tomorrow it will change into dust and the day after tomorrow will grow as a grass; one's life is the other's death; the "new" arises from the ashes of the "old."

The events happening herein are likewise all related to each other; they are the links that are connected together to form the chain that is called the universe. An apparently insignificant alteration in the position of a small link affects the positions of all other links on both sides. A minute change in an atom causes changes in the whole system of the world, although we may not notice it. (If we do not know that a thing exists, it does not mean that it does not exist.)

This universal inter-relation was known to, and described by, the ancient philosophers; and it has been fully manifested by modern sciences. And the Qur'an had explained to the Muslims this phenomenon long before they learned it from philosophers, scientists and mathematicians of other nations, and then started to do their own researches on these lines. The Divine Book tells us how the system of the heavens and the earth are interlocked, how one affects the other, how all are joined together in attaining to the purpose of creation, how the Divine decree permeates every thing, how all are proceeding towards their Lord, and how the final destination is with God.

Likewise, the characteristics and attributes of our actions are linked together. Even the opposite actions stand face to face with each other, and if one of them goes away, the other would not be recognized. It resembles the physical world where making of one thing depends on unmaking of the other, and the one's progress causes the other's retrogress. If one of the opposite is missing, the other's desired effects on the society would also disappear. The same is the case of virtue and evil as shown by the Divine religion. Obedience is a virtue because

disobedience is an evil; good deeds deserve good recompense because bad deeds attract severe requital; reward is pleasant because punishment is unpleasant; and pleasure is desired because displeasure is undesirable. Man by nature gravitates towards felicity and happiness; and runs away from infelicity and unhappiness. If this natural movement stops, the existence itself would dissolve into nothingness.

Obedience, then good deeds, then reward, then pleasure, then happiness—it is a chain that runs parallel to disobedience, then evil deeds, then punishment, then displeasure, then unhappiness. Each side manifests itself by hiding the other; each one gets life in the death of its opposite. How can one call to good deeds without warning against its opposite misdeeds?

We can see in this light that in the Divine wisdom it was necessary for the universe to contain the opposites—virtue and evil, obedience and disobedience. At this stage, there appears an important difference: Creation and destruction, making and unmaking in all things, except human actions, are attributed to God, because the creation and all its affairs are in His hands, He has no partner or colleague. So far as the actions are concerned, if they are good and virtuous, they too are directly attributed to God, because He has guided the man to them. But evil deeds and affairs, like whispering of Satan, overpowering of man by desires or rule of a tyrant over a nation, may be indirectly attributed to God, inasmuch as He withdraws His help from the doers of such deeds and leaves them free to go astray. It is this factor that is called "permission." It is correct to say that God has permitted Satan to misguide human beings with his whisperings and deceptions; that He does not prevent man from following his base desires; and that He does not hinder an unjust person from his oppression. He has decreed this system because felicity and infelicity are based on freedom of choice; if a man succeeds, it shall be by his own free choice; and if he fails, it too shall be by his own free choice. Otherwise, the proof of God could not be completed against His servants, and the intended test would be irrelevant.

What prevented the said exegete and others like him from letting the Qur'anic arguments and expressions progress to their logical result, was their reluctance to accept what seemed to them a wrong conclusion. Those who believed that everything is done by God and that there

is no cause other than God were disinclined to accept that things were linked together in a chain of cause and effect, because, according to their thinking, it implied a reduction in the all pervasive power of God. Others thought that if deeds of all types could be attributed to God—directly or indirectly—it would absolve the man from responsibility of his action, as it would mean that he was not free in his action; rather he was a helpless tool in the hands of God. Once it was accepted, the system of test, reward and punishment would be negated; and there would be no justification for ordaining the Divine law and religion.

But they should have meditated on the words of God revealed in the Qur'an: … *and Allah is predominant over His affairs* (12:21); … *surely His is the creation and the command* (7:54); *Now surely of Allah is what is in the heavens and the earth* … (10:55). There are many similar verses that prove what we have explained above; and a short description of this topic was given under the verse: *Surely Allah is not ashamed to set forth any parable—[that of] a gnat or any thing above that* (2:26).

Now we return to our original topic: Apparently the doer of the verb, "It has been made to seem fair," is something other than God it is either Satan or the man's soul itself. There are four reasons to support this view of ours:

First: The verse condemns the disbelievers because they are inclined to these embellishments of the world—wealth and children and think that these things may avail them against God. It is an adornment that turns one away from remembrance of God, and it is not proper to ascribe such a "making fair-seeming" to God.

Second: If this "making fair-seeming" is attributed to God, it would point to the natural inclination, ingrained in human creation. In that case, it was more appropriate to use the word, *al-insān* (human being, man) or children of Adam; because God uses such words on such occasions: *Certainly We created man* (al-insān) *in the best make. Then We rendered him the lowest of the low* (95:4-5); *And surely We have honored the children of Adam, and We carry them in the land and the sea, and We have given them of the good things, and We have made them to excel by an appropriate excellence over most of those whom We have created* (17:70). But in the verse under discussion God has used the word, *al-nās* (men, people) which more often than not has been used in the Qur'an to show worthlessness of the people referred to, to show their

immaturity and narrow-mindedness. For example, … *but most men do not consent to aught but denying* (17:89); *O you people! surely We have created you of a male and a female …* (49:13), and so on.

Third: The items of desires enumerated in this verse do not fit properly the inclinations ingrained in human nature. If the Qur'an wanted to refer to the natural desires, then it would have been more appropriate to change the words, "women and sons and hoarded treasures of gold and silver" with the words, "spouses, and children and wealth." After all the natural inclination towards the opposite sex is found in women as much as in men; and the parents love their daughters as much as their sons; and man loves wealth in general and not only the hoarded treasures of gold and silver.

Those who say that the doer of the verb, "It has been made to seem fair" is God, have had to say that the word, "women," refers to matrimony in general; the "sons" means children of both sexes; and the phrase, "hoarded treasures of gold and silver" stands for wealth in general. They say that the words used in the verse have been given just as the most popular examples of every item.

But it is stretching the meanings too far.

Fourth: To say that it is God Who has made these items fair-seeming to men is not in conformity with the end of the verse: "this is the provision of the life of this world; and God is He with Whom is the best destination. Say: 'Shall I tell you of what is better than these?' " Obviously these words have been used to divert their attention from these worldly desires, and create in them love of the things that are with God—paradise, pure mates and pleasure of God. The natural desire of worldly embellishments has been created by God, in order that man may use them to reach his spiritual destination—the same paradise and pleasure of God. That natural desire is the means to obtain that result. If God admonished men to forget these worldly desires and yet told them to reach the intended goal it would be self-contradictory. Who would want to satiate his hunger and yet abstain from food?

Question: This verse in its theme is not different from the verse, *Say: Who has prohibited the embellishment of Allah which He has brought forth for His servants and the good provisions? Say: These are for the believers in the life of this world, purely [theirs] on the Resurrection Day …* (7:32). In this verse the embellishment is ascribed to God; likewise,

the doer of this "making fair-seeming" in the verse under discussion should be God.

Reply: There is a clear difference in the import of the two verses. The verse under discussion condemns these desires; because they divert the attention of men from God and from what is with God. It exhorts them to turn aside from these worldly entanglements and to look forward to what is with God. The theme of the verse of Chapter 7 is quite different. It says that these embellishments have been created for the benefit of human beings; the believers enjoy them in this world together with the others; and it will be reserved for the believers only in the next world. It should be noted that this verse uses the word "His servants," instead of the "men" and it counts the embellishment as "the good provisions."

Question: What has been made fair-seeming is "the love of desires," not the desires themselves. The fact that love seems fair to man and attracts him is a natural reality. The expression, that love has been made fair-seeming to men, means that it has been made effective in their hearts; in other words, love has been created in their hearts; and creation cannot be attributed to other than God. Therefore, He is the doer of this verb.

Reply: The context (to which we have referred) shows that adornment of love means that love has been given a power that attracts people to itself and prevents them from looking at other things. Adornment is an attractive thing that is used or worn by another thing; it attracts the people primarily to itself and then transfers that attraction to the wearer or user. A woman uses cosmetics and ornaments, in order to attract her man to herself—by way of those embellishments. Primarily the man is attracted by those embellishments, but the real objective of the woman is to attract him to herself. In this background, the semantic flow of the word, "It has been made fair-seeming … the love of desires …" is that primarily the love attracts the men to itself but the real objective is to enchant the people and let them sink in inordinate desire of the named trinkets of the world. In short, the effect of love is not the true objective; and therefore the argument mentioned in the question is out of place. The real goal (which has been condemned) is the desire, as may be seen in the verse: *But there followed after them an evil generation, who neglected prayer and followed the sensual desires,*

so they shall soon meet [the result of their] sin (19:59). This meaning is supported by the given list of the desired things. Moreover, the word "desire," although used here for desired things, has a shade of inordinate passion in its meaning.

… of women and sons and hoarded treasures of gold and silver and well-bred horses and cattle and tilth:[1]

The list of desired things given here does not mean that every man has so many loves of desires, as some exegetes have thought; they took the verse to refer to the natural love of spouse, children and wealth. But then they had to explain why human being has been referred to as "men" or people, why "children" has been changed to "sons" and why "wealth" has been described as "hoarded treasures."

The fact, however, is that the verse only says that people, in their inordinate love of worldly desires, are of various types: There are some lecherous persons whose only aim in life is lusting after women; it brings in its train numerous sins and social ills, like using musical instruments, singing, drinking liquor and many other evils. Such debauchery is found mostly in men; women as a rule are free from it (except, in rare cases). Then there are those who ardently love their sons and want their number to increase in order to become a strong

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1 *al-Nisāʾ* (women) is plural, it has no singular from this root; *al-banīn* (sons) is plural of *al-Ibn* (male offspring, direct or indirect); *al-qanāṭīr* is plural of *al-qinṭār* (a waterskin full of gold, a filled waterskin); *al-muqanṭarah* is passive participle (object-noun) of *al-qinṭār* although the latter is an inflexible noun. In Arabic language, they often ascribe to an inflexible noun a shade of meaning that makes it resemble an infinitive verb, and then make various words from it, for example, *al-bāqil*, *al-tāmir* and *al-ʿaṭṭār* for seller of *al-baql* (vegetable), *al-tamr* (date) and *al-ʿiṭr* (perfume) respectively. It qualifies the word *al-qanāṭīr* (treasures) with an adjective *al-muqanṭarah* (treasured, hoarded) which is derived from the same word. This device doubly confirms the meaning of the qualified words, for example, *danānīr mudannarah* (coined dinars), *dawāwīn mudawwanah* (recorded register), *ḥijāb maḥjūb* (veiled curtain) and *sitr mastūr* (concealed screen). *al-Khayl* (horses); *al-musawwamah* has two meanings: left free to pasture or branded. *al-Anʿām* is plural of *al-naʿam* which means camel, cow, buffalo, goat and sheep; *al-bahīmah* is more general than that and is used for all quadrupeds and excludes carnivora, birds and insects. *al-Ḥarth* (tilth) has a meaning of earning in it; it means farming (or cultivated plant) for a livelihood. (Auth.)

and powerful clan; this tendency is more prominent in nomadic tribes, and it especially concerns the sons, not the daughters. A third category is of those greedy avaricious persons who live only for the purpose of hoarding treasures and riches; this madness manifests itself especially in filling their coffers with gold and silver, or similar things like currency notes and bonds, other items are not valued very much by such people. This covetousness is predominant in inhabitants of villages and towns, and is seldom seen in nomads. Finally, come those who want to own a string of pedigreed horses. (It is those who are fond of horsemanship or horse-race); some others love to have cattle; yet others eagerly desire for agricultural farm. The last named three types of desire are sometimes found together.

People usually are overwhelmed by one of the above-mentioned desires primarily, and the rest is given a secondary place. One seldom (or, never) finds a man whose love of all these items is of equal degree.

Other desired "things," like power, position, prestige, presidency, ministry etc., are only imaginary things, that have no existence outside imagination. Man desires them not for their own sake, but only because they give him a chance to acquire wealth. And, in any case, it is not the purport of the verse to enumerate all the desires.

It proves what we mentioned earlier that the "love of desires" means inordinate attachment to these things (and it is ascribed to Satan); it does not refer to the natural love that has been ingrained in human psyche (and which is attributed to God).

… this is the provision of the life of this world; and Allah is He with Whom is the best destination. These desires are such as may be useful to manage the affairs of this life; but this life itself, like its provisions, is a transient thing; it will soon cease to exist. The good life and the best destination is only with God.

قُلْ أَؤُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِخَيْرٍ مِنْ ذَٰلِكُمْ ۚ لِلَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ جَنَّاتٌ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا
الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا وَأَزْوَاجٌ مُطَهَّرَةٌ وَرِضْوَانٌ مِنَ اللَّهِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ بَصِيرٌ بِالْعِبَادِ ﴿١٥﴾

(3:15) ***Say: "Shall I tell you of what is better than these?" For those who guard [against evil] are gardens with their Lord, beneath which rivers flow, to abide in them, and pure mates and Allah's pleasure; and Allah sees the servants.***

It elaborates the preceding sentence, and God is He with Whom is the best destination. It puts, in place of the above-mentioned transient and misleading desires, other things that are best for the man, because they shall remain for ever and are really good, without any shade of imperfection. Although these good enjoyments are similar to those evil desires, but they are free from all evil and bad effects, and they do not divert the man's attention from sublime Divine realities. The three good enjoyments are the paradise, the pure mates and the pleasure of God.

Among the blessings of the paradise are the pure mates. The verse has already mentioned the paradise. Then what was the need of mentioning the "pure mates" separately. It is because sexual intercourse is the greatest physical pleasure of a human being. It was for the same reason that the preceding verse mentioned "women" before "sons" and "hoarded treasures." *al-Riḍwān* is also read as *al-ruḍwān*; it means pleasure, when a reality is agreeable to one's heart; *al-sukhṭ* (displeasure) is its opposite.

The Qur'an repeatedly mentions the pleasure of God. God is pleased with a servant if he obeys His command; also He is pleased if the servant acquires such attributes and qualities which are good and praiseworthy. But in most—nay, all—places where it has been mentioned in the Qur'an, it is related to the obedience. That is why sometimes it is described side by side with the pleasure of the servant. God is pleased with His servant because of his obedience; the servant is pleased with his Master because of the good reward given to him. God says: *Allah is well pleased with them and they are well pleased with Him* (98:8); *O tranquilled soul [that art at rest]! Return to thy Lord, well pleased [with Him], well pleasing [to Him]* (89:27-28); *And [as for] the foremost, the first of the Emigrants and the Helpers, and those who followed them in goodness, Allah is well pleased with them and they are well pleased with Him* (9:100).

Pleasure of God has been counted here as one of those things that are better for men than the desires of this world's life. It shows that this pleasure itself is one of the things that man should desire—or, it accompanies such things that should be desired by him. That is why it has been joined in this verse with the gardens and the pure wives. In other verses, it has been jointly mentioned with grace, forgiveness and mercy of God: … *seeking the grace from their Lord and [His] pleasure*

… (5:2); *and forgiveness from Allah and [His] pleasure …* (57:20); … *mercy from Himself and [His] pleasure …* (9:21).

The verse under discussion implies a sublime reality that one may comprehend on meditating on the verses mentioned above, for example, *Allah is well pleased with them …* (98:8) and: *well pleased with Him, well pleasing [to Him]* (89:28). The verses say that God is well pleased with them; it is different from saying that He is well pleased with their deeds. It proves that God shall never reject any of their prayers; He shall never disappoint them in whatever they ask Him for. It leads to us to the verse: *They have therein what they wish and with Us is more yet* (50:35). In short, when God is pleased with a man, that man shall be granted all his wishes without any reservation.

Now we may realize the true significance of the verses. Man thinks that if he acquires the worldly objects mentioned in the preceding verse—and especially the hoarded treasures—it will give him freedom of action; he will be able to do whatever he wishes and he will get unlimited power; but he is grossly mistaken in it. Such unlimited power comes only from the pleasure of God, Who has every affair in His own hands.

… and Allah sees the servants: The two verses showed that God has created for man in both worlds many bounties and pleasant things which he is wont to enjoy, for example, sexual pleasure, food, drink, property and things like that. These items are found in both worlds, with one difference—the pleasures of this world are available to both the believers and the non-believers; but the bounties of the next world are reserved for the believers only; non-believers will have no share in it.

A question could be asked: Why this difference? Why only the believers will be given the pleasant things of the next world? The sentence, "God sees the servants," answers this unasked question. This difference between the believer and non-believer is based on a basic difference between their conditions, and God sees them and knows the difference between them. The dividing factor is piety and fear of God, which is found in the believer only. That attribute of piety and fear of God has been elaborated in the next two verses: "Those who say … forgiveness before dawn." The pious believers declare that they depend on their Lord in all their affairs; and they confirm that declaration with

good deeds. The unbeliever, on the other hand, thinks that he is independent of God; he remains entangled in worldly desires, forgets the next world and his ultimate destination. Therefore, he shall be denied the pleasures of that world. Now read again the verses, "this is the provision of the life of this world; and God is He with Whom is the best destination. Say: 'Shall I tell you of what is better than these?' For those who guard (against evil) are gardens with their Lord, beneath which rivers flow, to abide in them, and pure mates …" Also, look at other verses of the same theme, for example, *Say: Who has prohibited the embellishment of Allah which He has brought forth for His servants and the good provisions? Say: These are for the believers in the life of this world, purely [theirs] on the Resurrection Day; thus do We make the signs clear fora people who know* (7:32). If you ponder on such verses, you will easily grasp the reality of the bounties of the paradise; also you will know how baseless is the following objection directed against them by many writers:

Objection: Look at any worldly thing; all its actions and reactions emanate from various organs and faculties which are found in its system. God has equipped it with those organs and faculties to protect and preserve its existence. After all, existence is not a matter of chance, nor does it happen at random or without a purpose. Here is the man; his whole body is equipped with the most efficient and most mind-boggling systems, all geared to one aim—to ingest and digest the food he takes. The digested food replaces the burnt up cells, tissues and other parts of the body; through this ever-continuing process, man remains alive, his body recoups its losses and even grows. Likewise, he has been given the most intricate reproductive systems—male and female complementing each other in the most awe-inspiring manner. And the purpose behind it is to preserve and propagate the human species.

What has been said about the man, is equally true for the animal and the vegetables.

The nature very cunningly put delicious taste and irresistible pleasure in these actions, compelling the creatures, and especially the man and the animal, to do it again and again in pursuit of pleasure. Immersed in the pleasure of food and sexual intercourse, man is seldom aware that the nature is using him for its own goal, that is, preservation of human race. If the food and sexual intercourse were devoid

of pleasure, no man would have indulged in them—even if he was told that the survival of his race depended on it. But in the present set-up man gladly endures whatever hardships come in his way and obtains those pleasures. When he gets his desire, he feels happy and even proud of his achievement. But it is the nature that should really be proud of its planning: It wanted to keep the individual alive—and it was done through eating; and it wanted the species to survive—and this goal was attained through copulation. And what was left for the self-satisfied man? Nothing except the memory of a transient pleasure.

These worldly pleasures are ingrained in our system but for a limited and transitory purpose. There is no reason why they should be transplanted from this world to the next where that purpose cannot be attained. The pleasure of food, drink and other such things is meant to protect the body from weakness, sickness and death. The pleasure of sexual intercourse and other related things is meant for the continuity and survival of the human race. If a man is taken out of this world and given an everlasting existence which is immune from death and annihilation; a life that is free from every hardship and difficulty, and every sorrow and grief, then there is no reason why he should be encumbered with these worldly organs and faculties. Why should he be burdened with various systems of the body and a myriad of organs like stomach, kidneys, bladder, spleen, liver, and so on? After all, they were needed only in the worldly life which was transitory; what purpose would they serve in the eternal life?

Reply: God has created these pleasures as well as the bounties from which they spring forth, as an embellishment of this world's life. The aim is to attract the man initially to them—and through them to the life itself. God has said: *Surely We have made whatever is on the earth an embellishment for it …* (18:7); *Wealth and children are an adornment of the life of this world …* (18:46); *… coveting the* (transitory) *goods of this world's life …* (4:94). *And do not stretch your eyes after that with which We have provided different classes of them,* (of) *the splendor of this world's life, that We may thereby try them; and the sustenance [given] by your Lord is better and more abiding* (20:131).

Note: This verse covers all aspects of the subject under discussion.

And whatever things you have been given are only a provision of this world's life and its adornment, and whatever is with Allah is better and

more lasting; do you not then understand? (28:60).

There are many verses of the same import. They make it clear that all the bounties of this world have been created to make this life pleasant—this life which is so short and finite. If there were no life, these bounties and their pleasures would not have been created. This is a fact and upto this point we totally agree with our adversaries.

Now comes the important reality which has been overlooked by the said objector. When he says that the man is given an everlasting existence in the next world, what meaning does he assign to the word "man"? Man has no other identity except this existence which he perfects in various stages. He is a combination of a spirit and a body

the body which is made of various organs, faculties, powers and senses. Remove these organs and faculties and so on, and there will remain neither any person nor his existence—nothing will survive. Negation of body and its various systems and organs is not just a negation of man's continued existence, it is negation of the man himself.

Man, in fact, is a being who procreates, eats, drinks and copulates; he manages the things given them to, and receiving them from, others; he feels, thinks and understands; he feels happiness and is overcome by sorrow. All these actions and reactions form his personality—we may say that he is the sum total of these faculties and systems. Then God transfers him from this transitory world to the everlasting abode and makes him an eternal being—either enjoying everlasting reward or undergoing abiding punishment. But God does not do so by nullifying man's entity and giving him another one; He only bestows on his present entity the quality of eternity, removing from it the defects of changes and death. Whatever bounties he is awarded, they must be similar to those he had enjoyed in this world; otherwise, he would not enjoy it at all. And what are the pleasures he is familiar with? There is nothing except sexual intercourse, food, drink, clothes, house, friends, and other such enjoyments. Of course, there will be one difference: While the pleasure of this world is transitory, that of the next will be eternal. Likewise, the punishments given to him should be similar to the hardships and afflictions of this world, with the same difference while the calamities of this world are transitory, those of the next will be everlasting.

In short, man in the next world will remain the same man; there

too he will need and require the same things which he needed and required here. The difference between the pleasures and displeasures of this world and those of the next is that the latter will be eternal and everlasting.

This reality manifests itself in the words of God, where He describes the creation of man: *And certainly We created man of an extract of clay; then We made him a small life-germ in a firm resting-place, then We made the life-germ a clot, then We made the clot a lump of flesh, then We made [in] the lump of flesh bones, then We clothed the bones with flesh; then We caused it to grow into another creation; so blessed be Allah, the best of the creators. Then after that you will most surely die. Then surely on the Day of Resurrection you shall be raised* (23:12-16). Note the verbs in the beginning, "We created," and "We made"; the Arabic verbs are derived from *al-khalq* which implies collection, combination and re-arrangement. Then comes the verb *anshaʾnāhū* (We caused it to grow into); it implies a change in the mode of creation. (Obviously, it refers to the relation of the soul with the body.) Lastly, comes the declaration, *Then surely on the Day of Resurrection you shall be raised*. The sentence addresses the same person who was given a body and then was caused to grow into another creation. It is that combination of body and soul that will be raised on the Day of Resurrection. Likewise, He says: *He [also] said: Therein shall you live, and therein shall you die, and from it shall you be raised* (7:25). In other words, the man's life is the earthly one, made of its joys and its sorrows. We have explained it to a certain extent under the verse: *Mankind was but one people …* (2:213).

God says about the bounties of this world: *this is the provision of the life of this world* (3:14); and then He says: *and this world's life is nothing in the hereafter but [only some] provision* (13:26). The very life of this world is a provision in the hereafter; it is a means of enjoyment in the next life. It is a very unique expression; and it opens a thousand doors of knowledge for those who may ponder on it. The verse confirms the tradition of the Messenger of God: "As you live, so you shall die; and as you die, so you shall be raised."

To sum it up, the life of man is made up of the worldly existence together with the good or evil he may have earned. It is this very life which shall be his provision in the hereafter, where he shall reap the reward or punishment according to what he thinks to be his success and prosperity,

or failure and loss. He will be awarded his pleasures and enjoyments and will thus get eternal happiness; on the other hand, if he were deprived of those pleasures and enjoyments, he would remain in eternal sorrow. And this what is meant by the bounties of the Garden and the torment of the Fire.

Let us explain it further. Man has a felicity according to his nature, and an infelicity according to the same. The felicity and infelicity are related to his survival as an individual and as a species. This survival depends on his various physical actions, like eating, drinking, copulation and so on. God has made these actions attractive to him by investing them with pleasure and satisfaction. Thus, the man proceeds on the path of perfection and begins working consciously according to his senses and will. At this stage, his perfection becomes inextricably interlocked with his senses and will. He does not recognize any perfection unless he desires it and feels it, even if it is a perfection in the eyes of the nature. For example, we do not draw any pleasure from that which we do not actively feel, even if it is a natural source of pleasure, like the health, wealth and child. On the other hand, we get pleasure from what we actively feel to be pleasant, even if it is not so in reality, like a patient who believes himself to be in good health.

At this stage, these preliminary pleasures become real perfection for the man, although according to the nature they were but preliminary ones. When God bestows eternity on such a man, his happiness will depend on only those pleasures which he would himself wish for and desire. And his unhappiness will emanate from that which he would not desire. Felicity of a man having perception and will emanates from that which he knows and desires; and his infelicity from that which he knows but does not desire.

The man would be happy in the hereafter only if he got the pleasures which he used to desire in the life of this world, like the food, the drink and the spouses—and even more; and this is the paradise. And he would be unhappy if he did not get that; and this is the hell. God says: *they shall have in them what they please* (16:13).

الَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا إِنَّنَا آمَنَّا فَاغْفِرْ لَنَا ذُنُوبَنَا وَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ ﴿١٦﴾

(3:16) ***Those who say: Our Lord! surely we believe, therefore forgive us our sins and save us from the chastisement of the fire.***

The pronoun, "those," refers to "those who guard (against evil)," mentioned in the preceding verse. They call upon God and say, "Our Lord!" By declaring His lordship, they confess their own servitude and seek His Mercy to grant them what they are asking for. "Surely we believe": The sentence is not an attempt to lay God under their obligation, because it is God Who lays the believers under His obligation by helping them to believe. God says: … *rather Allah lays you under an obligation by guiding you to the faith* … (49:17). Rather it is a plea to God to fulfil for them the promise of forgiveness made with the believers: … *and believe in Him, He will forgive you of your faults* … (46:31). That is why the next clause begins with "therefore," (*therefore forgive us our sins*), showing that this prayer is based on the preceding clause. The assertive particle *inna* (surely) emphasizes their truth, showing that they are firm in their belief.

The forgiveness of sins, *per se,* does not necessarily mean release from punishment. Saving a sinner from punishment is a grace which God bestows on him who believes in Him and worships Him. It is not a right of the servant that God should save him from the chastisement of the Fire, or that He should admit him into the Garden. Even the servant's belief and obedience are from the grace of God; obviously they cannot give the servant any right upon God. Of course, sometimes God in His mercy establishes some rights for the servants on Himself; and one of those rights is the promise given to them that He would forgive their sins and save them from the chastisement of the Fire—provided they believed in Him: … *and believe in Him, He will forgive you of your faults and protect you from a painful punishment* (46:31).

Nevertheless, it may be inferred from some Qur'anic verses that the protection from the punishment of the Fire is one and same with the forgiveness and the Garden. God says: *O you who believe! shall I lead you to a merchandise which may deliver you from a painful chastisement? You shall believe in Allah and His Messenger, and struggle hard in Allah's way with your properties and your lives, that is better for you, did you but know. He will forgive you your faults and cause you to enter into gardens beneath which rivers flow, and goodly dwellings in gardens of perpetuity; that is the mighty achievement* (61:10-12). The last sentences (saying that the believers' faults shall be forgiven and they shall enter into gardens) explain in detail what the first sentence had said

in a general way: "shall I lead you to a merchandise which may deliver you from a painful chastisement?" Thus, deliverance from chastisement means forgiveness of sins and entry into the garden. It is a very subtle idea, and we shall explain it in a more appropriate place, God willing.

الصَّابِرِينَ وَالصَّادِقِينَ وَالْقَانِتِينَ وَالْمُنْفِقِينَ وَالْمُسْتَغْفِرِينَ بِالْأَسْحَارِ ﴿١٧﴾

(3:17) ***The patient, and the truthful, and the devout [ones] and those who spend [benevolently] and those who ask for forgiveness before dawn.***

The five attributes refer to "those who guard (against evil)"; these are the virtues which are essential for piety, for guarding against evil.

Patience: This virtue has been mentioned first and without any condition. It, therefore, covers all three kinds of patience: Patience (that is, steadfastness) in obedience of *Allah;* patience (that is, abstaining) from the disobedience; and patience (that is, forbearance) in face of a calamity.

Truth: The final analysis of truth means conformity of a man's exterior—his word and deed—with his inner-self. In this sense, it covers all the other virtues mentioned here, like patience and devoutness etc. Obviously, such a meaning would not fit the context. We have, therefore, to interpret it as the truth in words only. And God knows better.

Devoutness: It means humility before *Allah;* and covers all the acts of worship and obedience.

Spending (benevolently): It is giving money to him who deserves it.

Asking for forgiveness before dawn: It makes it necessary for the servant to pray in the last hours of night in order that he may ask for forgiveness in that prayer. Traditions say that it refers to the non-obligatory prayer after midnight, and to the asking for forgiveness in *al-qunūt*[1]. God has pointed to it as a way that leads man to his Lord. Vide Chapters 73 and 74, where mentioning the prayer after midnight. God says: *Surely this is a reminder, so whoever pleases takes to his Lord a way* (73:19; 76:29).

شَهِدَ اللَّهُ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ وَأُولُو الْعِلْمِ قَائِمًا بِالْقِسْطِ ۚ لَا إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ

1 The special invocation before bowing down in the *ṣalāt* of *al-watr* (the last, that is, eleventh *rakʿah* of the prayer after midnight; it is performed as an independent unit, with a *qunūt* before bowing down). (Trans.)

الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿١٨﴾

(3:18) ***Allah bears witness that there is no god but He, and [so do] the angels and those possessed of knowledge, maintaining [His creation] with justice*** **(bi al-Qisṭ)*****; there is no god but He, the Mighty, the Wise.***

The verbal noun, *al-shahādah* originally meant "to look at," "to see"; one got knowledge of a thing or an event by being present at the time and place of occurrence and looking at it. Then it was used for describing it to others and bearing witness to the knowledge thus gained. Thereafter, the word was concurrently used for both meanings, both being treated as its real meanings. After all, there was not much distance from acquiring a knowledge to describing it to others. Mostly one acquires knowledge of an event with one aim in view: to preserve the reality and truth—lest it be invalidated or falsified as a result of a dispute or because of someone's attempt to conceal the truth and usurp the right, or because one really forgets it. A witness protects the truth and reality. Acquiring the knowledge and bearing the testimony accordingly is called witnessing—protecting the truth.

al-Qisṭ is justice. The preceding eight verses, beginning with, "(As for) those who disbelieve" and ending at, "those who ask for forgiveness before dawn," have shown that there is no god other than God, and that nothing can avail one against Him; whatever the man relies on in this life, whatever he thinks may avail him against his Lord, it is but an embellishment and a provision—the Lord has given him that provision in order that he may use it for a better purpose—for his success in the hereafter. But that success cannot be attained except with piety and fear of God. The bounties of this world are commonly enjoyed by both the believer and the unbeliever; but the bounties of the hereafter are reserved for the believers only. Those verses have described the fundamental truth; now in this verse God reconfirms it bearing witness that what has been told above is pure truth without a shadow of doubt.

God bears witness that there is no god but He. As there is no god besides God, nothing whatsoever can avail a man against God be it his wealth or his children or any other embellishment of this life. If any of these could avail a man against God, it would have become a god itself; or at least it would be relying on some other god. But there is no god except God.

He bears this witness while He stands with justice in His actions, looks after His creation with equity. He manages the affairs of the universe through a system of cause and effect. This system has been created by Him; and ultimately every thing—the cause, the effect and their mutual relationship—returns to Him. He has placed in this highway of progress countless bounties in order that the man may enjoy and use them in this world, and then get their benefit in the hereafter. It is a provision for the road; man should make its use as a temporary measure. He should not settle permanently on the roadside.

God bears witness to these facts, and He is a Just Witness. Here we should point to a very fine point:

The justice of God is a witness for itself as well as for His Oneness. In other words, His justice is a self-sustaining reality and also proves that God is One. When we hear a testimony, we insist that the witness must be a just one, of approved probity; he must be proceeding on the straight path of nature, and should not deviate from it—neither to the right nor to the left. In short, he should put every thing in its right place, and should do every work at its proper time and place in a proper way. Such a man is called just and his testimony shall be accepted because it should be free from lie and falsehood. The man becomes just by adhering to the path of nature. When conformity with that path and system bestows justice on a man, how can there be any doubt about the justice of that system itself. It is a pure justice—and it is the work of God.

When we feel waxed on account of an event occurring in the nature, or when we find it taking place against our inclination and desire, we, in our annoyance, dispute about it and object against it. (Interestingly we depend, in that disputation too, on the same natural system.) Then on further investigation we come to understand the reason of that event, and find that our objection had no leg to stand upon. Or may be we failed in our search and could not find any reason for it; so what have we got in our hand? Only the ignorance of the reason. But the absence of the knowledge of reason is not the same as the knowledge of the absence of reason. To make a long story short, the system found in the universe (and it is the handiwork of God) is pure justice. And if there were any other god besides God, the whole system could not be called all-encompassing justice; the work of each

god would have been "just" only within the sphere of his own activity, only in his own jurisdiction. Thus, the justice of the system of creation proves the Oneness of the Creator.

God bears witness—and He is the Just Witness—that there is no god but He. He testifies in clear words and says: "God bears witness that there is no god but He." The verse contains the testimony of God for His Oneness; in this respect, it resembles the verse 4:166 which says: *But Allah bears witness by what He has revealed to you that He has revealed it with His knowledge [also]*; *and Allah is sufficient as a witness.*

The angels bear witness that there is no god but He. God informs us in the verses of Meccan period, revealed long before this one, that the angels are His honored servants, who act according to His commandment and declare His glory in His praise: *Nay! they are honored servants; they do not precede Him in speech and [only] according to His commandment do they act* (21:26-27); *… and the angels declare His glory in the praise of their Lord …* (42:5). And their declaration of His glory includes the testimony that there is no god besides Him.

Those possessed of knowledge bear witness that there is no god but He. They look at and ponder on His signs in the universe and in their own selves; and those signs have overwhelmed their perception and taken deep root in their minds.

The foregoing discourse makes it clear that:

First: The witness, mentioned here, is the testimony in words, as the verse manifestly shows. It does not refer to bearing witness by actions—although the Divine actions too are evidence of His Oneness. There is an intricate system permeating the creation right from the smallest particle to the whole universe; and this oneness of system bears witness to the Oneness of the Creator. Nevertheless, this verse refers to the verbal testimony only.

Second: The clause, *maintaining [His creation] with justice*, is a circumstantial one, referring to the subject, "God" and governed by the verb, "bear witness." In other words, His "maintaining (His creation) with justice" is not witnessed for, neither by God nor by the angels or those possessed of knowledge; rather it means that God, maintaining (His creation) with justice, bears witness that there is no god but He; and the angels and those possessed of knowledge bear witness to His Oneness.

This meaning is obvious from the position of this clause. "There is no god but He," is the reality that has been witnessed for; and the clause, "maintaining (His creation) with justice" has been separated from it by the words, "and (so do) the angels and those possessed of knowledge." If this clause were a part of the testimony, it should have been joined to the former clause and written thus: 'that there is no god but He, maintaining (His creation) with justice, and (so do) the angels …'

Some exegetes have written that the clause may be explained in both ways; but the above explanation shows that it is not so.

Someone has offered a very absurd explanation. He thinks that the testimony mentioned in this verse is not verbal, is not given in words. According to him, if the testimony were a verbal one, the belief in Oneness of God would depend on someone's words, and not on rational reasoning. But acceptance of that word and testimony depends on the belief in God. A vicious circle!

He goes on to say:

> That is why some exegetes have said that the verb, "bears witness," has been used here in a metaphorical sense. The creation, with all its interwoven, interdependent and intricate systems, proves that the whole universe has been created by One Creator. It is as though God Himself, through this practical demonstration, is speaking and testifying for His Oneness. Likewise, the angels worship Him and act according to His commandment, and the knowledgeable people look at the signs pointing to His Oneness and their attitude and behavior are tantamount to the witness that there is no god but God.

Reply: This explanation is based on a fallacious presumption. It is true that where we can acquire a knowledge ourselves through external senses or intellectual reasoning, we do not rely on other's reporting or testimony. The reason being that such a reporting or testimony does not create the firm knowledge which may be gained through intellectual reasoning or external senses. But if there is a report that create as firm a knowledge as the intellectual reasoning (or even firmer than that), then it will be as much reliable as that reasoning (if not more than that). For example, a *mutawātir* report is far more effective and creates a much more surer knowledge than an intellectual reasoning based on logic or analogy, although the latter too creates certainty.

Now, suppose there is a witness who, we know, cannot tell lies because his truth and veracity has been proven by clear proofs—then his testimony would create as much certainty as a rational argument. And we know that God can never utter a falsehood, because nothing can be further from His sublime presence than a defect or a falsehood. His witness about His Oneness is, therefore, a true witness. Likewise, His report, that the angels and those possessed of knowledge bear witness for His Oneness, firmly proves that they really bear this witness.

Moreover, the polytheists, who ascribe to God some partners like idols and other deities, only believe those idols or deities to be intercessors, the links between God and His creation; God quotes them as saying: *We do not worship them save that they may make us nearer to Allah* (39:3).

Likewise, those who are guilty of the hidden polytheism, that is, those who while believing in God do good deeds for the sake of worldly things (example., to satisfy their own desire, to please some other persons, or to gain some wealth or prestige, and so on), they too believe that these things are created and given their power by God. In other words, whoever ascribes a partner to God, does so with a belief that God has taken that partner to Himself; no one says that the putative partner got that partnership on its own. In this background, when God bears witness that He has not taken any partner to Himself, it is enough to refute the claim of those who ascribe any partner to Him. Accordingly, the verse will have the same connotation as the verse: *And they worship beside Allah what can neither harm them nor profit them, and they say: These are our intercessors with Allah. Say: Do you* (presume to) *inform Allah of what He knows not in the heavens and the earth? Glory be to Him and supremely exalted is He above what they set up* (with Him) (11:18). It is a rebuttal of the claim that He has got any partner. How can it be when He Himself does not know of any such partner, neither in the heaven nor in the earth? And He knows every thing; nothing is hidden from Him. The fact is that the verse under discussion is a proposition like other informations that have come to us from His sublime presence, for example, the final clause in the verse 11:18 mentioned just above, *Glory be to Him and supremely exalted is He above what they set up [with Him]*. But as this proposition is in fact a claim and as the speaker is not only just but also the source of every

justice, it was put before the audience in the form of a testimony, for the sake of variety in style. According to this interpretation, the meaning of the verse would be as follows: Had there been any deities other than God, having some say in the creation and management of the universe, in their capacity as partners with, or intercessors before God, undoubtedly God would have known them and testified for them; but He says that He does not know of any partner for Himself; it surely means that He has no partner at all. Also, the angels are the intermediaries who carry out His commandment in respect of creation and management. Had there been any such partner, they would have known of him and admitted his presence. But they too bear witness that there is no god except God. Finally, the knowledgeable persons would have known of such a partner and noticed the hallmarks of his creation or management. But the only signs they see are those pointing to the One and only God, and therefore they too bear witness that He has no partner or colleague.

This argument is similar to the following one: If there were in a certain country a king, other than the king who is known to us, this king would certainly have known of him; it would have been impossible for him not to know of someone supposed to be his partner. Likewise, the officials of the government would have known of him; how could they be oblivious of his existence when they were supposed to take orders from him and enforce his dicta among the subjects? And in the same way, the knowledgeable persons among the populace would have known of his presence; after all, they are supposed to live in his kingdom and obey his laws. But the king rebuts the existence of any such partner in his kingdom, and the government officials do not know of any such person, and the knowledgeable class of the subjects have not seen anything to prove his existence. All this together makes us absolutely sure that no such man exists.

… there is no god but He; the Mighty, the Wise: It is a sort of a parenthetical sentence, having no connection to the main argument, yet complying with the demands of the Divine sublimity. It is a set practice of the Qur'an to declare the glory of God and pay respect to Him, whenever something unworthy of His sublime name is mentioned. For example: *They say: Allah has taken a son [to Himself]! Glory be to Him* (11:68). The phrase, "Glory be to Him," pays respect to God because the

preceding sentence had quoted a saying that was unworthy of God's attributes. Another verse: *And the Jews say: The hand of Allah is tied up! Their hands shall be shackled and they shall be cursed for what they say* (5:64). Now, in the verse under discussion, the first part mentioned the testimony of God, the angels and those possessed of knowledge that God had no partner or colleague. Therefore, it was a right of God on the reporter of that testimony (who, incidentally, is God Himself) as well as on the hearers to declare that He is really One, and has no partner; everyone, on hearing that testimony, should reiterate, "there is no god but He."

There is another verse which gives a similar lesson; it admonishes the believers who heard a lie spoken against a wife of the Prophet: *And why did you not, when you heard it, say: It does not beseem us that we should talk of it; glory be to Thee! this is a great calumny* (24:16). It is a right of God, when we hear a calumny and want to declare the innocence of the person slandered, to glorify God before that.

This sentence, "there is no god but He, the Mighty, the Wise," is a sort of a praise for God, to give Him His due respect; that is why it ends with the adjectives, "the Mighty, the Wise." In other words, it is not an offshoot of the preceding witness; otherwise, it would have ended with the adjectives showing His Oneness and Justice.

God has a right that His oneness should be declared whenever the said witness is mentioned; He alone is the Mighty One, His might and power is absolute, there is no partner in His godhead to dilute His might; He alone is the Wise One, His wisdom does not allow anyone to interfere in the creation or the management of the affairs.

The above paragraphs show why the phrase, "there is no god but He," has been repeated, and why it has been ended with the adjectives, "the Mighty, the Wise." And God knows better.

Examining Narrations

(1) Muḥammad b. Isḥāq has narrated through his chain of narrators: "When the Messenger of God defeated the Quraysh at Badr and returned to Medina, he gathered the Jews at the market of Qīnaqāʿ, and said: 'O Jewish people! Be on your guard against God, lest comes to you similar to that which has afflicted the Quraysh at Badr; and accept Islam before descends upon you

that which has descended upon them. And you know that I am a prophet, sent (by God), you find it (written) in your books.' They said: 'O Muḥammad! Don't be deluded if you fought against an inexperienced people who knew nothing of the (tactics of) war and thus you got a chance to afflict them. As for us, by God, if we fought against you, you will know that we are indeed the (real) people.' Then God revealed the verse: *Say to those who disbelieve: You shall be vanquished …*" (*Majmaᶜ al-bayān*)

Author's comment: The above tradition has also been narrated in *al-Durr al-manthūr,* qouting Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Jarir and al-Bayhaqī (in his *al-Dalāʾil*), from Ibn ᶜAbbās. The Shīᶜah exegete, al-Qummī, too has a nearly similar tradition in his *Tafsīr.* But as would have been clear from the foregoing commentary, this tradition is not in perfect harmony with the context of the verses. It seems more likely that these verses were revealed after the battle of Uḥud. And God knows better.

(2) al-Ṣādiq said: "People do not enjoy, in this world or in the hereafter, any pleasure greater than the pleasure of women; and that is the word of God: *It has been made to seem fair to to men, the love of desires of women and sons …*" Then he said: "And certainly the people of the garden shall not savor of anything of the garden more delicious to them than the sexual intercourse—neither food nor drink." (*al-Kāfi;* al-ᶜAyyāshī)

Author's comment: It has been inferred from the sequence of the desired things in the verse, as the women have been placed before everything else. Then it has been said that it is only a provision of the life of this world, and the pleasures of the paradise are better than that.

When the Imam said that sexual intercourse was the most delicious of all the pleasures, he was comparing it with the pleasures related to the body.[1] He was not speaking about spiritual pleasure, for example, the delight a man gets from his own existence, or the joy a friend of God feels from being nearer to Him, seeing His great signs and receiving His pleasure and blessings. Rational arguments prove that the pleasure a man gets from his existence is the greatest; other proofs show that the pleasure he feels from the existence of his Lord is even greater than that; and there are numerous traditions saying that the

1 It is obvious from the last clause of the tradition where the Imam compares it with the food and drink. (Trans.)

bliss a servant enjoys from being nearer to God is the greatest of all pleasures. It has been narrated in *al-Kāfī* from al-Bāqir that he said: "ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn used to say: 'It makes my Soul agreeable to early death and murder which beset us that God has said: *Do they not see that We come into the land, curtailing it of its sides?* (13:41); and it refers to the departure of the learned people (from this world).' " Other such traditions will be given in other relevant places.

(3) al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq said about the word of God, *and hoarded treasures:* "*al-Qinṭār* is gold that could fill the hide of an ox." (*Majmaʿ al-bayān*)

(4) The Imam said: "*al-Khaylu ʾl-musawwamah* (translated here as well-bred horses) means the horses which are put on pasture." (*Tafsīr al-Qummī*)

(5) al-Ṣādiq said: "Whoever recites seventy times while he is in standing posture, in his prayer of *al-watr*, 'I seek forgiveness from God and return to Him,' and continues to do so regularly for (at least) a year, God writes him among those who ask for forgiveness before dawn, and he is bound to get forgiveness from God, the High." (*Man lā yaḥḍuru al-faqīh; al-Khiṣāl*)

Author's comment: This meaning is given also in other traditions narrated from the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt; and it is one of the sunnah of the Prophet. A similar tradition has been reported in *al-Durr al-manthūr* through Ibn Jarīr from Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad (al-Ṣādiq) that he said: "Whoever prays a part of the night, then asks for forgiveness at the end of the night, he will be written among those who ask for forgiveness."

The statement of the Imam: "and he is bound to get forgiveness from God," is based on their prayer mentioned in the preceding verse: *Our Lord! surely we believe, therefore, forgive us our sins …* God has quoted their prayer without any comment; it implies that He has granted the prayer.

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Verses 19-25

إِنَّ الدِّينَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الْإِسْلَامُ ۗ وَمَا اخْتَلَفَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ إِلَّا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا
جَاءَهُمُ الْعِلْمُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ ۗ وَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ ﴿١٩﴾
فَإِنْ حَاجُّوكَ فَقُلْ أَسْلَمْتُ وَجْهِيَ لِلَّهِ وَمَنِ اتَّبَعَنِ ۗ وَقُلْ لِلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ
وَالْأُمِّيِّينَ أَأَسْلَمْتُمْ ۚ فَإِنْ أَسْلَمُوا فَقَدِ اهْتَدَوْا ۖ وَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَإِنَّمَا عَلَيْكَ الْبَلَاغُ ۗ
وَاللَّهُ بَصِيرٌ بِالْعِبَادِ ﴿٢٠﴾ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَكْفُرُونَ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَيَقْتُلُونَ النَّبِيِّينَ بِغَيْرِ
حَقٍّ وَيَقْتُلُونَ الَّذِينَ يَأْمُرُونَ بِالْقِسْطِ مِنَ النَّاسِ فَبَشِّرْهُمْ بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٢١﴾
أُولَٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ حَبِطَتْ أَعْمَالُهُمْ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ وَمَا لَهُمْ مِنْ نَاصِرِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾ أَلَمْ تَرَ
إِلَى الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا نَصِيبًا مِنَ الْكِتَابِ يُدْعَوْنَ إِلَىٰ كِتَابِ اللَّهِ لِيَحْكُمَ بَيْنَهُمْ ثُمَّ
يَتَوَلَّىٰ فَرِيقٌ مِنْهُمْ وَهُمْ مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَالُوا لَنْ تَمَسَّنَا النَّارُ إِلَّا أَيَّامًا
مَعْدُودَاتٍ ۖ وَغَرَّهُمْ فِي دِينِهِمْ مَا كَانُوا يَفْتَرُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾ فَكَيْفَ إِذَا جَمَعْنَاهُمْ لِيَوْمٍ لَا
رَيْبَ فِيهِ وَوُفِّيَتْ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَا كَسَبَتْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

(3:19) *Surely the religion with Allah is Islam; and those to whom the. Book had been given did not differ but after knowledge had come to them, out of envy among themselves; and whoever disbelieves in the signs of Allah then surely Allah is quick of reckoning.*

(3:20) *But if they dispute with you, say: I have submitted myself [entirely] to Allah and [so has] every one who follows me. And say to those who have been given the Book and the unlearned people: Do you submit yourselves? So if they submit then indeed they follow the right way; and if they turn back, then upon you is only the delivery of the message; and Allah sees the servants.*

(3:21) *Surely [as for] those who disbelieve in the signs of Allah and slay the prophets unjustly and slay those among men who enjoin justice, announce to them a painful chastisement.*

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(3:22) *Those are they whose works shall become null in this world as well as the hereafter, and they shall have no helpers.*

(3:23) *Have you not considered those who are given a portion of the Book? They are invited to the Book of Allah that it might decide between them, then a part of them turn back and they withdraw.*

(3:24) *This is because they say: The fire shall not touch us but for a counted number of days, and what they have forged deceives them in the matter of their religion.*

(3:25) *Then how [will it be] when We shall gather them together on a day about which there is no doubt, and every soul shall be fully paid what it has earned, and they shall not be dealt with unjustly?*

Commentary

The verses refer to the People of the Book. They are the last—and most important—of the three groups commented upon in this chapter. It was about the People of the Book—the Jews and the Christians—that a major part of this chapter was revealed.

إِنَّ الدِّينَ عِندَ اللَّهِ الْإِسْلَامُ ۗ وَمَا اخْتَلَفَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ إِلَّا مِن بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْعِلْمُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ ۗ وَمَن يَكْفُرْ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ ﴿١٩﴾

(3:19) ***Surely the religion with Allah is Islam; and those to whom the Book had been given did not differ but after knowledge had come to them, out of envy among themselves; and whoever disbelieves in the signs of Allah then surely Allah is quick of reckoning.***

We have already described the literal meaning of *al-Islām* (to submit, to surrender oneself to God). Apparently this is the meaning intended here, because it is followed by description of the difference of the People of the Book—the difference which they created after knowing the truth, because of envy among themselves.

The explanation of the verse, therefore, would be as follows: The religion with God is only one; there is no difference or discrepancy in it; He has commanded His servants to follow only this religion; it was this religion which was described in the Books revealed to His prophets, and to which the Divine signs pointed. It is the Islam, that is, surrender to the truth, with correct belief and sincere deeds; Islam is to accept willingly all the knowledge and commandments sent down by

God. Admittedly, the commandments varied in quality and quantity in various laws brought by various prophets—and God Himself mentions this fact in His Book—but in reality there was only one religion. The difference between various laws was in the degree of perfection, it was not because of any discrepancy or contradiction. All were one inasmuch as all called the people to surrender and submit themselves to the will of God, to His commandments sent through His prophets.

It is this religion which God expects His servants to follow, which He has sent down for them. It necessarily follows that man should accept all the knowledge which has been clearly explained to him, and should stop at doubtful matters—submitting himself to the will of God, without trying to interpret it according to his desire and thinking.

As for the difference of the People of the Book, (the Jews and the Christians) in the matter of religion, it was not because they did not know the truth; they certainly knew it; they were aware that the religion was only one, because God had revealed the Book which clearly explained that religion to them. Nevertheless, they differed among themselves because they were envious and unjust. Although they continued to believe in God, their envy and injustice made them disbelieve in the signs of God, in the Book of God, which had clearly explained to them the reality of religion. And whoever disbelieves in the signs of God then surely God is quick of reckoning; He will quickly call them to account in this world as well as in the hereafter. They shall be recompensed in this life with disgrace and ignominy, and in the hereafter with painful chastisement of the Fire.

Why do we say that the reckoning spans both lives? It is because God says after two verses: "Those are they whose works shall become null and void in this world as well as the hereafter."

The above explanation makes two things clear:

First: The clause, "the religion with God," refers to religion in the meaning of shariah; the verse says: There is only one religion ordained by God, the difference between various prophets' shariah being in the quality only; and the quality differed because of the capabilities of the various nations for which those rules were made.

In this verse, religion does not refer to the system of creation. In other words, it does not say that all people were created with a natural instinct to believe in God.

Second: The word *al-āyāt* (signs) refers to the verses of the Divine Books, sent to the prophets; it does not refer to the signs in the creation which lead one to the belief in one God.

The verse contains a threat to the People of the Book: They shall surely be punished for their envy and rebellion. It is similar to the threat addressed earlier to the polytheists and disbelievers: *Say to those who disbelieve: You shall be vanquished and gathered together to hell …* (3:11). Probably, that is the reason why the next verse joins the People of the Book and the polytheists together and says: "And say to those who have been given the Book and the unlearned people: 'Do you submit yourselves?' " There is a threat implied by the tone of this question too.

فَإِنْ حَاجُّوكَ فَقُلْ أَسْلَمْتُ وَجْهِيَ لِلَّهِ وَمَنِ اتَّبَعَنِ ۗ وَقُلْ لِلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ
وَالْأُمِّيِّينَ أَأَسْلَمْتُمْ ۚ فَإِنْ أَسْلَمُوا فَقَدِ اهْتَدَوْا ۖ وَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَإِنَّمَا عَلَيْكَ الْبَلَاغُ ۗ
وَاللَّهُ بَصِيرٌ بِالْعِبَادِ ﴿٢٠﴾

(3:20) ***But if they dispute with you, say: I have submitted myself [entirely] to Allah and [so has] every one who follows me. And say to those who have been given the Book and the unlearned people: Do you submit yourselves? So if they submit then indeed they follow the right way; and if they turn back, then upon you is only the delivery of the message; and Allah sees the servants.***

Obviously, the pronoun "they" refers to the People of the Book. The disputation points to their arguments about the difference. They would say: "Our difference does not emanate from any envy or injustice; we have tried our best to acquire the knowledge of the realities of religion; nevertheless, in this endeavour each one's thinking process and wisdom has led him to a different conclusion. It does not mean that we have become arrogant or rebellious, nor that we are not submissive to God. Even what you call us to, O Muḥammad!, similarly emanates from a different process of thinking. You too have differed from us in the same way." God demolishes such disputations in the next two sentences: … *say: I have submitted myself [entirely] to God …* and … *say to those who have been given the Book and the unlearned people: Do you submit yourselves?* These sentences are not an attempt to avoid the issue; they contain the clear rebuttal of the disputations of the People of the Book.

The connotation of the verse, read in conjunction with the preceding one, is as follows:

The religion with God is submission to God; the Books sent by God are unanimous on this point, and the untainted wisdom accepts it. Nobody can, therefore, blame you, O Muḥammad! for submitting to the will and command of God. You are a Muslim. If the People of the Book dispute with you about the religion, then you should tell them clearly that you have submitted yourself entirely to God and so have done all your followers. This is the real religion and no argument can be brought against this reality. Then you should ask them whether they too would submit themselves to God. If they did so, then they would indeed proceed on the right path, they would accept what had been revealed to you and to those prophets who came before you; there would be no argument against them and your mutual difference would come to an end. On the other hand, if they turned back, then do not enter into any disputation or argument with them. It is a self-evident truth that religion is total surrender to God, and there is no point in laboring to prove a self-evident reality. You should just convey the Divine message to them and that is all.

God has joined the People of the Book and the unlearned polytheists together in this verse: "And say to those who have been given the Book and the unlearned people: 'Do you submit yourselves?' " It is because both believed in religion and in God, although they differed because of their respective beliefs of monotheism and polytheism.

The phrase, translated here as "I have submitted myself (entirely) to God," literally means, I have submitted my face to God. *al-Wajh* (face, front). Most of the senses and organs of perception are concentrated in the face; therefore, submitting one's face to God signifies total submission to God's will, willing obedience to His commandments.

The clause, *and [so has] every one who follows me*, shows the excellence of the Prophet, and also enhances the rank of the followers by joining them to him.

And say to those who have been given the Book and the unlearned **(al-Ummiyy)** ***people:*** "The unlearned people" refers to the polytheists; it shows the contrast between them and the People of the Book; also the People of the Book used to call them unlearned, as God quotes them as saying: *There is not upon us in the matter of the unlearned*

people any way [to reproach] (3:75). *al-Ummiyy* means one who does not read or write.[1]

The clauses "and if they turn back, then upon you is only the delivery of the message; and God sees the servants" signify three things:

First: Undesirability of unnecessary disputations; entering into arguments with someone who denies a self-evident truth would inevitably lead to obstinacy and obtrusiveness.

Second: The total authority concerning the people and their affairs is of God; the Prophet is an Messenger and a conveyer of the Divine message, he is not a guard to watch over men. God says: *You have no concern in the affair* (3:128); *You are not a watcher over them* (88:22).

Third: The clauses contain a threat to the People of the Book and the polytheists; the connotation cannot be lost to one who reads the clauses. The verses, in their theme and the threat, are similar to the verses: *Say: We believe in Allah … and to Him do we submit. If then they believe as you believe, they are indeed on the right course, and if they turn back, then they are only in great opposition; so Allah will suffice you against them, and He is the Hearing, the Knowing* (2:136-137). According to this verse if the People of the Book turn back, then it means that they are obstinate in their opposition and heedless to the truth; then it comforts the Prophet in a way that contains a threat to his adversaries. Likewise, the verse under discussion tells the Prophet, "and if they turn back, then upon you is only the delivery of the message"; it is a hint that the Prophet should leave them to their Lord Who sees His servants and Who would deal with them in a suitable way, and punish them as they deserve.

Some exegetes have written that the verse gives the people freedom of religious belief and that there is no compulsion in religion. But the explanation given above manifestly shows that it implies the opposite of freedom; it threatens the disbelievers with chastisements if they did not submit themselves to God.

Allah sees the servants: It could have been phrased as "God sees the men" or "God sees them"; instead God chose the epithet, "the servants," to remind them that they are His servants and slaves; His order against them will certainly be carried out in its entirety, because they

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1 *al-Ummiyy* does not mean not knowing how to read and write. (Ed.)

are totally dependant on Him, whether they consciously submitted to Him or not; they can never escape His judgment.

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَكْفُرُونَ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَيَقْتُلُونَ النَّبِيِّينَ بِغَيْرِ حَقٍّ وَيَقْتُلُونَ الَّذِينَ يَأْمُرُونَ بِالْقِسْطِ مِنَ النَّاسِ فَبَشِّرْهُمْ بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٢١﴾ أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ حَبِطَتْ أَعْمَالُهُمْ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ وَمَا لَهُمْ مِنْ نَاصِرِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

(3:21-22) ***Surely [as for] those who disbelieve in the signs of Allah and slay the prophets unjustly and slay those among men who enjoin justice, announce to them a painful chastisement. Those are they whose works shall become null in this world as well as the hereafter, and they shall have no helpers.***

The verse [3:22] deals with another aspect of the subject; nevertheless, it has a threatening overtone, not unlike the last parts of the preceding verse. This verse too speaks about the People of the Book, especially the Jews.

Those who disbelieve … and slay the prophets … and slay those among men who enjoin justice: The verbal form used in these sentences implies persistence and continuity. It conveys the idea that it was their ingrained habit, a characteristic trait, to disbelieve in divinely sent communications, to reject the revealed truth out of envy and arrogance, to murder the prophets—and such a slaying was undoubtedly against justice and to kill those of their compatriots who called them to justice and tried to keep them away from injustice and rebellion. And the history of the Jews confirms that these things were a part of their national character; they had murdered a multitude of their prophets and good believers who enjoined the good and forbade the evil. The Christians too followed in their footsteps and killed countless good Christians.

… announce to them a painful chastisement: It announces that the wrath of God had descended upon them. The chastisement was not confined to the hereafter only; they were to be punished in this life too. Read for the proof the next verse, *Those are they whose works shall become null in this world as well as the hereafter* (3:22). In the hereafter they shall have to endure the painful chastisement of the Fire; in this world, they were punished with mass murders, dispersion, loss of lives and properties, and God has inflicted them with enmity and hatred among themselves which is to continue up to the Day of Resurrection,

as the Qur'anic verses have said (for example, verse 5:14).

The verse (3:22), moreover, proves two things:

First: If a man killed someone just because the latter used to enjoin the good and forbid the evil, the killer's good deeds would become null and void, would be forfeited.

Second: On the Day of Resurrection, intercession shall not avail such a killer, because God says: "and they shall have no helpers."

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا نَصِيبًا مِنَ الْكِتَابِ يُدْعَوْنَ إِلَىٰ كِتَابِ اللَّهِ لِيَحْكُمَ بَيْنَهُمْ ثُمَّ يَتَوَلَّىٰ فَرِيقٌ مِنْهُمْ وَهُمْ مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

(3:23) ***Have you not considered those who are given a portion of the Book? They are invited to the Book of Allah that it might decide between them, then a part of them turn back and they withdraw.***

It further shows how steeped the People of the Book are in their envy and rebellion. They rebel against God by creating disputes and frictions in religion. When they are invited to the Book of God in order that it might decide between them they do not agree to it, they turn away and withdraw from it. This tendency of theirs emanates from their self-delusion that the Fire shall not touch them but for a few days; they are deceived by their own forgery!

The words, *those who are given a portion of the Book*, refer to the People of the Book. This changed phrasing points to a well-known historical fact: The Jews and the Christians do not have in their hands the complete Books; what they have got is only some portions of the revealed Scriptures. They have altered, changed and edited the Books so extensively that the major part of the original has been lost for ever. The last sentence too alludes to this fact: "and what they have forged deceives them in the matter of their religion." The verse, in short, says—and God knows better—that the Jews and the Christians turn back from the judgment of the Book of God, being deceived by their own claim, and misled by what they have themselves forged; they demonstrate, by their behavior, that they do not need the Book of God.

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَالُوا لَنْ تَمَسَّنَا النَّارُ إِلَّا أَيَّامًا مَعْدُودَاتٍ ۖ وَغَرَّهُمْ فِي دِينِهِمْ مَا كَانُوا يَفْتَرُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

(3:24) ***This is because they say: The fire shall not touch us but for a counted number of days; and what they have forged deceives them in the matter of their religion.***

Its meaning is quite clear. Usually a man is not deceived by his own deception; then how did those people fall prey to their own forgery? It was because the deceived people had not forged it themselves; it was forged by a past generation. Then why did the Qur'an ascribe that deception and forgery to those Jews and Christians who were contemporaries of the Prophet? It was because they were one nation the later generations were (and are) pleased with what their ancestors had done.

Moreover, it was not improbable for the People of the Book, and especially the Jews, to be carried away by their own delusion—knowing well that it was a delusion—or to boast of their exploits in this field. God has described their involvement in an even more astonishing deception: *And when they meet those who believe they say: We believe; and when they are alone one with another they say: Do you talk to them of what Allah has disclosed to you that they may argue with you by this before your Lord? Do you not then understand? What! Do they not know that Allah knows what they conceal and what they proclaim.* (2:76-77)

Also, man's actions emanate for the most part from the traits ingrained in his psyche; he always returns to the things which his psychological build up has made attractive to him. When he is attracted by that pull, knowledge is left behind, and becomes ineffective. For example, the drug addicts, the chain smokers and the people like them use those things although they know that they are extremely harmful and ruinous to their health, and they are fully aware that such things must be avoided. But the ingrained habit becomes the second nature, and the addict is irresistibly pulled to those "pleasures," without giving his knowledge or thinking power any chance to influence his decision.

Likewise, the People of the Book, as a result of their perennial indiscipline, had acquired the traits of arrogance, envy and rebellion, and were overcome by the irresistible urge to base desires. This had become a second nature to them. And under its influence they forged many things—the forgeries that were disastrous to their religion. And they repeated those forgeries—knowing fully well that they were lies—so often and so long that they themselves began believing in them, and the repeated falsehood replaced the truth in their mind; they fell prey

to their own devices. Psychologists know that such phenomenon does occur from time to time. The continuously repeated and diligently taught forgeries got hold of the whole nations to such an extent that they became deceived in the matters of their religion, and refused to submit themselves to God and accept the truth revealed in His Book.

فَكَيْفَ إِذَا جَمَعْنَاهُمْ لِيَوْمٍ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ وَوُفِّيَتْ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَا كَسَبَتْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

(3:25) ***Then how [will it be] when We shall gather them together on a day about which there is no doubt, and every soul shall be fully paid what it has earned, and they shall not be dealt with unjustly?***

The phrase governed by the interrogative "how" was omitted because it could be understood from the context; it could be something like, how will it be, or, how will they fare.

The verse continues the threatening mode of the preceding verses. It shows that those, who turn back and withdraw when called to the Book of God, cannot defeat the Divine judgment. The Day of Reckoning is approaching fast; how will they behave on that Day about which there is no doubt? Then they will be quite submissive, in clear contrast with their arrogance and haughtiness of this world! It was to show this contrast that God used the word, "We shall gather them together," and did not say, We shall raise them, or, We shall make them alive.

The meaning of the verses is as follows—and God knows better: When the People of the Book are invited to the Book of God in order that it might decide between them, then a part of them turn back and withdraw; it is because they are deceived by what they have forged in the matter of their religion, and also because they arrogantly refuse to submit to the truth. Well, what will they do when We shall gather them together on the day about which there is no doubt, the day when the judgment will be decisively, truthfully and justly pronounced, and every soul shall be fully paid what it had earned, and they shall not be dealt with unjustly, because the judgments will be based on justice? As they know this fact, it is necessary for them not to turn away from the Book of God, not to withdraw from it, as though they could defeat the purpose of God or could overrule His decrees! Do not they know that every power belongs to God, and that this life is but a trial?

Examining Narrations

(1) Muḥammad b. Muslim said: "I asked the Imam about the word of God, *Surely the religion with Allah is Islam.* And he said: 'that (Islam) which contains (true) belief.' " (al-ʿAyyāshī)

(2) Ibn Shahrāshūb narrates from al-Bāqir about the word of God: *Surely the religion with Allah is Islam,* that he said: "Submitting to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib in (his) mastership."

Author's comment: The explanation is based on the principle of the "flow" of the Qur'an[1]. And probably the preceding tradition too has the same connotation.

(3) The same narrator reports that ʿAlī said: "I shall define Islam as no one has defined before me, and no one shall do after me. Islam is submission, and submission is conviction, and conviction is affirmation, and affirmation is acknowledgement, and acknowledgement is discharge (of obligation), and discharge (of obligation) is action. The believer has taken his religion from his Lord. Certainly, the belief of a believer is recognized in his deed, and the disbelief of an unbeliever is recognized in his denial. O people! (look after) your religion, (look after) your religion, because a sin in it is better than a good (deed) in other (religions); the sin (committed while believing) in this (religion) will be forgiven, and the good (deed) in other (religions) will not be accepted."

Author's comment: The words of the Imam, "I shall define Islam": *al-Nisbah* (literally, relation, to relate) here means to define; Chapter 112 (the Unity) has been named in some traditions as the chapter of *al-nisbah* of God.

The Imam has defined all the terms with the help of their concomitants, except the first word, *al-Islām* (submission) which has been explained with its more clearly understood synonym *al-taslīm* (submission). We may also possibly take the word, Islam, to signify the religion brought by Muḥammad; in that case the first phrase too (Islam is submission) would be a definition with a concomitant.

However, the Imam means to say: This religion known as Islam entails submission of man, in his person and his action, to God; he surrenders his soul and all his activities to God's command and will; it

1 Note that the author explains this principle in Eng. vol. 1. (Ed.)

is called *al-taslīm* (submission); *al-taslīm* in its turn entails firm conviction and certainty about God, in a way as not to allow any doubt whatsoever about Him; conviction entails affirmation of the religion's truth; and affirmation entails acknowledgement of its firmness, that is, the fact that religion is firmly rooted and unshakable; and this acknowledgement leads the believer to discharge all his obligations accordingly, and the discharge of obligations necessitates acting according to the dictates of religion.

"… and the good (deed) in other (religions) will not be accepted," that is, the doer will not be given its reward in the hereafter. Or it may mean: It will not create any good impression with God either in this world or in the hereafter. As we have explained the sentence, it is not in conflict with other traditions which say that the unbelievers are rewarded for their good deeds with the good provisions of this world. God has said: *So he who has done an atom's weight of good shall see it* (99:7).

(4) Abū ʿUbaydah al-Jarrāḥ said: "I said: 'O Messenger of God! which people shall suffer the severest punishment on the Day of Resurrection?' He said: 'A man who killed a prophet or (murdered) a man who enjoined good and forbade evil.' Then he recited: *[those who] slay the prophets unjustly and slay those among men who enjoin justice …* Then he said: 'O Abū ʿUbaydah! the Israelites killed forty-three prophets in one hour. Then stood up one hundred and twelve persons from among the devout Israelites and enjoined those killers to do good and forbade them (to do any) evil. Thereupon, they killed all those (devout persons) by the end of the same day. And it is this (massacre) which God has mentioned (in this verse).' " (*Majmaʿ al-bayān*)

Author's comment: The same explanation has been narrated in *al-Durr al-manthūr,* through Ibn Jarīr and Ibn Abī Ḥātim, from Abū ʿUbaydah.

(5) It is reported in *al-Durr al-manthūr:* Ibn Isḥāq, Ibn Jarīr, Ibn al-Mundhir and Ibn Abī Ḥātim have narrated from Ibn ʿAbbās that he said: "The Messenger of God went to a group of the Jews in (their) house of *midrash,* and invited them to God. al-Nuʿmān b. ʿAmr and Ḥarth b. Zayd asked him: 'On which religion are

you? O Muḥammad!' He said: 'On the faith and religion of Abraham.' They said: 'But Abraham was a Jew!' Thereupon the Messenger of God told them: 'Then bring to me the Torah; it is (the judge) between you and us.' They rejected his (proposal). Then God revealed: *Have you not considered those who are given a portion of the Book? … deceived them in the matter of their religion.*"

Author's comment: Some people have narrated that the verse, "Have you not considered …," was revealed in connection with the episode of stoning. We shall give its detail under the verse: *O People of the Book! indeed has come to you Our Messenger making clear to you much of what you concealed of the Book …* (5:15).

However, these two traditions are from *aḥād,*[1] and are not so strong.

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1 *Aḥād,* the plural of *al-wāḥid* (one). In Islamic terminology it is used for a tradition which is not narrated by a great enough number of narrators as to create a certainty of its truth. (Trans.)

Verses 26-27

قُلِ اللَّهُمَّ مَالِكَ الْمُلْكِ تُؤْتِي الْمُلْكَ مَنْ تَشَاءُ وَتَنْزِعُ الْمُلْكَ مِمَّنْ تَشَاءُ وَتُعِزُّ مَنْ تَشَاءُ وَتُذِلُّ مَنْ تَشَاءُ ۖ بِيَدِكَ الْخَيْرُ ۖ إِنَّكَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢٦﴾ تُولِجُ اللَّيْلَ فِي النَّهَارِ وَتُولِجُ النَّهَارَ فِي اللَّيْلِ ۖ وَتُخْرِجُ الْحَيَّ مِنَ الْمَيِّتِ وَتُخْرِجُ الْمَيِّتَ مِنَ الْحَيِّ وَتَرْزُقُ مَنْ تَشَاءُ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ ﴿٢٧﴾

(3:26) *Say: O Allah, Master of the Kingdom! Thou givest the Kingdom to whomsoever Thou pleasest and takest away the Kingdom from whomsoever Thou pleasest, and Thou exaltest whom Thou pleasest and abasest whom Thou pleasest; in Thine hand is the good; surely, Thou hast power over all things.*

(3:27) *Thou makest the night to enter into the day and Thou makest the dat to enter into the night, and Thou bringest forth the living from the dead and Thou bringest forth the dead from the living, and Thou givest sustenance to whom Thou pleasest, without measure.*

Introduction

The two verses do have a sort of connection with the preceding talk about the People of the Book, and especially the Jews. They were earlier threatened with the chastisements of this world and the hereafter. It was a part of that chastisement that God deprived them of their kingdom, and they were inflicted by abasement and humiliation up to the Day of Resurrection; also they lost so many lives and their rule was short of sovereignty.

Apart from that, the main theme of the chapter, as was mentioned in the beginning, is to show that the creation and all its affairs are totally in the hands of God; He is the Master of the Kingdom, He gives Kingdom, honor and good to whomsoever He pleases; and takes away the Kingdom, honor and good from whomsoever He pleases.

The verses are, thus, in total conformity with the theme of the chapter.

Commentary

قُلِ اللَّهُمَّ مَالِكَ الْمُلْكِ تُؤْتِي الْمُلْكَ مَنْ تَشَاءُ وَتَنْزِعُ الْمُلْكَ مِمَّنْ تَشَاءُ وَتُعِزُّ مَنْ تَشَاءُ وَتُذِلُّ مَنْ تَشَاءُ ۖ بِيَدِكَ الْخَيْرُ ۖ إِنَّكَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢٦﴾

(3:26) ***Say: "O Allah, Master of the Kingdom! Thou givest the Kingdom to whomsoever Thou pleasest and takest away the Kingdom from whomsoever Thou pleasest, and Thou exaltest whom Thou pleasest and abasest whom Thou pleasest; in Thine hand is the good; surely, Thou hast power over all things.***

The verse advises the believer to seek refuge with God—in Whose hand is all the good and all the power—in order that he may remain unaffected by baseless ideas of the hypocrites, the polytheists and the People of the Book, the groups who were under the illusion that they had the kingdom and honors in their hands and that in this way they were independent of God! Such thoughts were their undoing; they were totally lost and ruined because of this illusion. The believer should steer clear of such ideas and should present himself with humility before God Who bestows good and gives sustenance without measure to whomsoever He pleases. The meaning of *al-milk* (property, possession) is known to, and understood by, all; and we recognize it as a lawful concept and reality.

"Possession" is of two kinds:

Real Possession: It is the ability inherent in a creature, for example, man, to dispose, manage and manipulate another thing in any way he likes. For example, a man may use or not use his eyesight, depending on his choice; he may use his hand in getting hold of a thing or letting it go; and so on. There exists between such a possessor and such a property a real, unchangeable and untransferable relationship; a relationship that makes the property dependent on the possessor for its very existence—it cannot be separated from the possessor without being destroyed. In the above example, the eye or the hand cannot be removed from the man without losing its usefulness and even its existence in the process.

In this category comes the possession and ownership, which belongs to God, of this universe with all its big and small components, as well as of all its affairs. He has the right, authority and power to do with it,

and in it, as He pleases.

Conventional Possession: It is the possession based on man-made convention; the ability of, let us say, a man to dispose and manage a thing, as he likes—the authority based on the convention laid down by wise men to achieve the society's aims. They looked at the plane of creation and found it replete with real possession and its effects; so they invented a similar institution for the plane of civilization and laid down the system of the conventional possession for the society. Their goal was to obtain benefits from the world's provisions similar to those a real owner gets from his real possession. This relationship between a conventional owner and his property is not a real thing; it is just an abstract idea based on society's convention; and that is why such an ownership, unlike the real one, may be transferred to another person through trade, gift, inheritance etc.

al-Mulk (kingdom) too is a sort of *al-milk* (possession) inasmuch as the king or ruler owns what the people of a country do own; he manages and disposes what the people have in their possession, without there occurring any clash between their management and his, between their will and his. It is in fact an ownership over ownership—the king's ownership being vertically above the public's; in the same way as, for example, a master owns his slave and also all that is owned by the slave.

The kingdom too, being a sort of possession, is divided into two categories: the real and the conventional.

God is the absolute Owner of every thing; His is the absolute Lordship and absolute management; He is the Creator of every thing and God of every thing. He says: *That is Allah, your Lord, the Creator of every thing; there is no god but He* (40:62); *whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth is His* (2:255). There are numerous verses showing that whatever is called a "thing" exists because of God, is dependent in its quiddity and existence on Him; it cannot stand without Him. Nothing can prevent God from disposing and managing a thing in any way He pleases; and as we explained earlier, it is the real possession.

And He is also the absolute King of the creation, because He is its absolute Owner. There is a system of ownership pervading the universe—the causes own their effects; every thing owns its active faculties and powers; those faculties and powers own their activities. For

example, man owns all his limbs, organs and faculties like the eyes and ears; and the eyes and ears own their faculties of sight and hearing. As mentioned above, God owns every thing; therefore, He owns every owner as well as all his (or its) possessions; and this is what is called the Kingship. He is therefore the absolute King of all the creation. He has said: *to Him belongs the Kingdom, and to Him is due* (all) *praise* (64:1); … *with a most Powerful King* (54:55); there are numerous such verses. Needless to say, it is the real possession and kingships.

As for the conventional possession and kingship, this too actually belongs to God. God is the conventional Owner too, because it is He Who bestows the ownership to every thing which owns any thing. He could not do so unless He Himself did own that thing; other wise it would have looked as if He was bestowing a thing He did not own to someone who could not own! God says: *and give them of the wealth of Allah which He has given to you …* (24:33). Also, He is the conventional King, because He is the Law-giver and the Ruler, Who regulates, by His order, all the things which the people own, just as the kings regulate the financial affairs of their subjects. God says: *Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of men, the King, of men* (114:1-2); *And He gives you all that you ask Him; and if you count Allah's bounties, you will not be able to compute them* (14:34); *and spend out of what He has made you to be successors of* (57:7); *And what reason have you that you should not spend in Allah's way? And Allah's is the inheritance of the heavens and the earth* (57:10); *To whom belongs the kingdom this day? To Allah, the One, the Subduer [of all]* (40:16). The verses show that God owned all that is in our hands before it came in our possession, and He continues to own it even when it belongs to us, and He will remain its owner (or let us say, Inheritor) when we are gone. His Kingship and ownership remains unaffected throughout.

It appears from the above that the words, "O God, Master of the Kingdom," point to the following three themes:

First: To God belongs every kingdom; He is the Owner of the Kingdom. In other words, He is the King of the kings; He gives every king his kingdom, every ruler his rule; He says: … *because Allah had given him the kingdom* (2:258); *and We have given them a grand kingdom* (4:54).

Second: The Divine name "God," precedes the epithet, "Master of

the Kingdom"; this arrangement explains the basis of His Kingship; He is the Master of the Kingdom because He is God, Great is His Majesty!

Third: "The Kingdom" here refers to its both kinds—the real and the conventional. (And God knows better!) The matters mentioned in the first verse (*Thou givest the Kingdom to whomsoever Thou pleasest and takest away the Kingdom from whomsoever Thou pleasest, and Thou exaltest whom Thou pleasest and abasest whom Thou pleasest*) refer to various aspects of the conventional kinship; while the next verse refers to the affairs of the real kingship. God is, therefore, the absolute Master of the Kingdom.

Thou givest the Kingdom to whomsoever Thou pleasest and takest away the Kingdom from whomsoever Thou pleasest: The statement is unrestricted and thus covers every kingdom, no matter whether it is obtained legally or illegally, nor whether it is based on justice or injustice. (We have explained this subject under the verse 2:258; … *because Allah has given him the kingdom.*) The kingdom, *per se,* is one of the bounties of God; it has the potential of doing good in, and improving, the human society. Man, by his very nature, loves to rule and dominate over others. A kingship, which falls into the hands of an undeserving person, is disliked and condemned, not because it is a kingship, but because it has been captured by one who has no right to it, (example, when someone usurps it through *coup d'etat*), or because of his bad character, injustice and oppression. This second reason is, in a way, another facet of the first.

To sum it up, if the king or the ruler is good, able and just, then the kingdom is a bounty of God for him. On the other hand, if he is undeserving and undesirable, then for him it is an affliction and trial. In either case, it is attributed to God, and is a means of trial, by which God tests His servants—the ruler and the ruled.

We have described earlier somewhere that when the Qur'an attaches the proviso of "God's pleasure," as in this verse, it does not mean that God's actions are done without a reason or without an aim. This proviso is a reiteration that God's power and His will are supreme; that God is not under any compulsion to do or not to do any particular work; nobody can oblige Him in any way; whatever He does, it is done according to His absolute will and power, and not because someone compels Him to do so. Nevertheless, all His actions are done and all

His decrees issued for one purpose: the good and well-being of His servants.

… and Thou exaltest whom Thou pleasest and abasest whom Thou pleasest: *al-ʿIzz* (to be hard to get; to be difficult to obtain). We say for a rare book or thing that it is *ʿazīz al-wujūd*; a man having a high prestige in his tribe, country or nation is called *ʿazīz al-qawm,* because it is difficult to subdue or overpower him. Then it was used for all types of difficulties; it is said *yaʿizzu ʿalayya kadhā* (it is hard for me to; it grieves me to). God says: … *grievous to him is your falling into distress* … (9:128). Also, it is used for overpowering. There is a proverb: *man ʿazza bazza* (he who vanquishes, takes the booty). God says: … *and he has prevailed against me in discourse* (38:23). But the basic meaning in all these usages is the same.

Opposite to it is *al-dhull* (to be easy to get or subdue—by real or supposed overpowering). God says: *And abasement and humiliation were brought down over them* (2:61); *and lower unto them the wing of humility out of compassion* (17:24); … *humble before the believers …* (5:54). The words translated as "abasement," "humility" and "humble" are various derivatives of *al-dhull.*

al-ʿIzzah (exaltation; might; honor) is an inseparable attribute of the absolute Kingship of God. Whoever, other than God, possesses any thing he gets it is because God has given him its ownership; whoever gets kingship, it is because God gives him that kingdom. Therefore, real honor and exaltation belong only to God; whatever honor is enjoyed by others, it is but a gift bestowed by God. He says: *Do they seek honor from them? Then surely all honor is for Allah* (4:139); … *and to Allah belongs the might and to His Messenger and to the believers …* (63:8). This is the true honor, real might. What others have got is only abasement in the guise of might, humiliation behind the mask of honor. God says: *Nay! those who disbelieve are in [self-] exaltation and opposition* (38:2). Then to show that self-exaltation is just an allusion, God immediately reminds them: *How many did We destroy before them of the generations, then they cried while the time of escaping had passed away* (38:3).

Abasement and dishonor, being the opposite of might and honor, are governed by the opposite factors. Everything, other than God, by itself is abase and without any honor—except him who is exalted by God; *and Thou exaltest whom Thou pleasest and abasest whom Thou*

pleasest.

… in Thine hand is the good; surely Thou hast power over all things: *al-Khayr* (the good) basically connotes 'selection'. We call a thing *khayr* (good) when we compare it with another thing and choose it—thus it is *khayr* (good) because it is the chosen one, the selected on. And why did we select it? Because it was more suitable for the purpose we had in mind. In other words, this thing is good because it is a means to obtain the ultimate good, that is, the purpose aimed at. The real "good."is that which is desired for itself. It is called good because it is chosen when compared with other things.

The word "good" carries a connotation of favorable comparison with other things. This has given rise to a misunderstanding that it is an adjective of comparative degrees, and that originally it was *akhyar*. But it is not so; it is not in comparative degree, although its root meaning carries a comparative value, and therefore it is often used as a substitute for "better," "more exalted" and so on. We say: Zayd is *afḍal* (more exalted) than ʿAmr; the same meaning is conveyed when we say: Zayd is *khayrun* than ʿAmr. We may say: *Zayd afḍaluhumā*, or we may change it to *Zayd khayruhumā* both sentences will convey the same meaning: Zayd is the better of the two. But this interchangeability of the two words does not make *al-khayr* an adjective of comparative degree; otherwise, it would have been conjugated on the paradigm of comparative degree, that is, on the paradigm of *aftḍal, afāḍil, fuḍlā, fuḍlayāt*. But *khayr* is not conjugated like that. Instead we say: *khayr, akhyār, khayrah, khayrāt* like *shaykh, ashyākh, shaykhah, shaykhāt* (old man, old men, old woman, old women). Therefore, it is a *al-ṣifat al-mushabbahah* (adjective denoting an inseparable attribute).

Moreover, *khayr* is also used in places where the context does not allow any comparison. For example, *Say: What is with Allah is better* (khayrun) *than sport …* (62:11). Now there is no good in the sport so that it could be said, "better than sport." What it actually means is: What is with God is good, and the sport is not good. (Those who think that the word *al-khayr,* is in comparative degree, say that in the sentences like the above, the word looses its comparative value. Such explanations need no comment!) The fact is that *al-khayr* gives a connotation of selection and choosing, and generally, but not necessarily, the thing which is not selected also has some good in it.

The above discourse shows that God is "good" absolutely and without any reservation or condition, because He it is Who is the ultimate goal and destination of every thing. Yet, the Qur'an has never used this word as a Divine name, although it has been used as an adjective referring to God: *and Allah is better and more abiding* (20:73); *are sundry lords better or Allah the One, the Supreme?* (12:39).

Of course, the word, *khayrun* (better, best) has been used as the first construct of those Divine names which are in genitive case; for example: *and Allah is the best* (khayr) *of sustainers* (62:11); *and He is the best of the judges* (7:87); *and He is the best of deciders* (6:57); *and He is the best of the helpers* (3:150); *and Allah is the best of planners* (3:54); *and Thou art the best of deciders* (7:89); *and Thou art the best of the forgivers* (7:155); *and Thou art the best of inheritors* (21:89); *and Thou art the best to cause to alight* (23:29); *and Thou art the best of the merciful ones* (23:109).

The reason for this fine distinction in usage is not difficult to understand. As the word, *al-khayr,* has a connotation of selection and option, it was not used as a name of God—it would not have been proper to compare Him in a general way with others, because all are subservient to Him. But there was no such difficulty in using the word as an adjective or as a relative description in a genitive case.

The sentence, "in Thine hand is the good," has a semantic value of restriction: the definite article in "the good" makes it cover all and every good; and the adverbial clause of place, "in Thine hand," coming at the beginning of the sentence, puts all the good exclusively into the hand of God. The meaning therefore is: Every good, which anyone may ever desire, is only under Thy management and control; it is Thou Who gives it to whomsoever Thou pleasest.

The sentence gives the reason of the preceding ones, which mention His giving the kingdom and honor to whomsoever He pleases and taking them away from whomsoever He pleases. It explains the particular, that is, bestowing kingdom and honor, with the help of a general attribute, "good" which is an all-encompassing term and covers other bounties too. God controls every "good," and kingdom and honor are two of those good things; therefore, it is God who bestows them to whomsoever He pleases.

The taking away of the kingdom and abasing are 'good' in the same

way as giving the kingdom and exalting are. It is true that they are "evil"; but what is evil? It is absence of good. Taking away the kingdom is the same as not giving the kingdom; abasing is the same as not exalting. To say, God has the power to give it, is the same as saying, He has the power to withhold it. When every good emanates from Him, then every withholding of the good must necessarily emanate from Him. What we have to be careful about is that we should never attribute to Him any thing which is beneath His sublime sanctity; for example, we cannot say that the sins, errors and improprieties of the servants emanate from Him. Nevertheless, we may say that God leaves the sinners to do as they wish, and that He does not help such servants. (We have explained this matter before.)

Let us look at this matter from another angle: There are good and evil in the sphere of creation, like giving the kingdom and taking it away, exalting someone and abasing him and so on. The good, at this level, is a positive reality, and there is no difficulty in attributing it to God. And the evil, at this level, is just not giving the good to someone, and even here, there is no difficulty in attributing it to God; He is the only Master of every "good"; if He gives to someone from that good, then He should be thanked; if, on the other hand, He withholds it from someone, then nobody has any right to ask Him why, or to compel Him to give it. Whatever He does, is done for the general well-being of His creatures, for the good of the system which pervades every single component of the universe.

Likewise, there are good and evil in the sphere of legislation—various kinds of obedience and disobedience. Man is responsible for these actions, inasmuch as they are done by his own choice and will. Certainly, such actions can never be attributed to other than the man himself. It is this relationship between man and his actions which makes it possible to say, this is good, or, that is bad. If man had no freedom of will and choice, none of his deeds could be termed as good or evil. And these deeds cannot be attributed to God, except in the sense that He helps (in good deeds) or withholds His help (from evil ones), according to the reasons demanding such help or its withdrawal.

It shows that the good, all of it, is in the hand of God, and all the affairs of the universe—gain and loss; good and evil—emanate from that good.

An exegete has written:

> "There is a deleted by implied word in the sentence, *in Thine hand is the good*; according to him, it actually says, in Thine hand is the good and evil. He gives the example of another verse: *and He has given you garments to preserve you from the heat* (16:81), in which 'and cold,' is implied."

We understand the motive of the above assertion. He wanted to keep his distance from the Muʿtazilites. The Muʿtazilites do not attribute an evil to God, not even indirectly. Of course, their stand was wrong and we have already dealt with this topic in a previous volume. But it does not justify such strange implied additions to the speech of God; it is astonishing to see someone having the audacity to hazard such explanations in respect of the Qur'anic verses.

Thou hast power over all things: It shows why all good is in God's hand. He has absolute and exclusive power over every thing; it follows that anyone who has got any power, gets it by the authority of God. If not so, then that person's power would be outside the purview of God's power; in that case, God would not have power over all things. But we know that He has absolute and all-encompassing power; and therefore, every imaginable good is in His power. Consequently, all the good, that emanates from others' hands, is, in fact, bestowed by God. In short, the good, *per se,* is in His hands only. It was this exclusiveness to which the preceding sentence had referred: "in Thine hand is the good."

تُولِجُ اللَّيْلَ فِي النَّهَارِ وَتُولِجُ النَّهَارَ فِي اللَّيْلِ ۖ وَتُخْرِجُ الْحَيَّ مِنَ الْمَيِّتِ وَتُخْرِجُ الْمَيِّتَ مِنَ الْحَيِّ ۖ وَتَرْزُقُ مَنْ تَشَاءُ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ ﴿٢٧﴾

(3:27) ***Thou makest the night to enter into the day and Thou makest the day to enter into the night, and Thou bringest forth the living from the dead and Thou bringest forth the dead from the living, and Thou givest sustenance to whom Thou pleasest, without measure.***

al-Wulūj is to enter; its transitive is *al-īlāj* (to make enter, to insert).

Apparently, the above sentences refer to the continuously changing lengths of days and nights, throughout the year, depending on the latitude of a region and the position of the earth *vis-a-vis* the sun. In the northern hemisphere, from mid-winter to mid-summer, days become longer and longer and nights shorter and shorter—it is the entering of

the day into the night. And from mid-summer to mid-winter, nights become longer and longer and days shorter and shorter and it is the entering of the night into the day. The position in the southern hemisphere is just opposite. When the nights are longer in one hemisphere, they are shorter in the other; the same happens with the days. In this way, God is always making the day to enter into the night, and the night to enter into the day.

As for the two imaginary points of the north and the south poles, and the imaginary latitude of the equator, it seems that the days and the nights remain equal throughout the year. But in reality changes occur at those points too[1].

... and Thou bringest forth the living from the dead and Thou bringest forth the dead from the living: That is, God brings forth a believer from the loin of an unbeliever, and an unbeliever from the loin of a believer. God has named belief as life and light, and He calls disbelief as death and darkness. For example, He says: *Is he who was dead then We raised him to life and made for him a light by which he walks among the people, like him whose likeness is that of one in utter darkness whence he cannot come forth* (6:122).

The sentences may also be explained in a general way: God creates living organism, like vegetable and animal, from the earth which has no sense or feeling; and then gives death to the living things returning them to the earth. The Qur'anic verses almost clearly say that He

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1 This explanation is correct, as far as it goes. But another explanation, given by Maurice Bucaille, seems more comprehensive:

"[The astronauts have seen] how the Sun permanently lights up (except in the case of an eclipse) the half of the Earth's surface that is facing it, while the other half of the globe is in darkness. The Earth turns on its own axis and the lighting remains the same, so that an area in the form of a half-sphere makes one revolution around the Earth in twenty-four hours while the other half-sphere, that has remained in darkness, makes the same revolution in the same time. This perpetual rotation of night and day is quite clearly described in the Qur'an. It is easy for the human understanding to grasp this notion nowadays because we have the idea of the Sun's (relative) immobility and the Earth's rotation. This process of perpetual coiling, including the interpenetration of one sector by another is expressed in the Qur'an ..." (*The Bible, the Qur'an and Science;* North American Publications, Indianapolis; 1979; p. 164.) (Trans.)

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changes the living into dead and the dead into living. He says: … *then We caused it to grow into another creation; so blessed be Allah, the best of creators. Then after that you will most surely die* (23:14-15). There are other verses having the same connotation.

Some scientists say: The life emanated from some germs, evolving from one germ into another, and from that into a third and so on; that it did not spring up from senseless matter. The reason for this hypothesis lay in their belief that the universe came into being by itself, it was not created[1]. But experiments show that the living germs too are overcome by death. Thus the life changes into death, establishing a correlation between the two. (We shall further explain this subject somewhere else.)

However, this verse, "Thou makest the night … bringest forth the dead from the living," describes God's management of His real possession; as the preceding verse, "Thou givest the Kingdom … abasest whom Thou pleasest," shows His management of His conventional possession.

The two verses run parallel to each other: One describing four aspects of His management which stand face to face with the other four described by the other. The former mentions giving the kingdom and taking it away; the latter subtends it with the description of making the night to enter into the day and making the day to enter into the night. Then the former talks about exalting and abasing; and the latter speaks of bringing forth the living from the dead and vice versa. This juxtaposition provides a refreshing insight into the Qur'anic eloquence.

To give a kingdom to someone is to let him impose his authority over his compatriots; thus, to a certain extent, the freedom of the people is lost into the authority of the ruler. It is not dissimilar to making the night dominate over the day; the night (comparable to subjugation) takes away certain portions of the day (comparable to the freedom of the people).

The opposite is true for taking away the kingdom *vis-a-vis* making the day to enter into the night.

To exalt someone is similar to giving him a new life; he would have remained unknown and unrecognized, if God had not bestowed honor

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1 That is, they wanted to avoid answering the question: How did a living cell evolve from a lifeless matter? How could the matter be the source of life when it had no life itself? (Trans.)

upon him. That is why it has been put parallel to bringing forth the living from the dead.

Likewise, abasing and bringing forth the dead from the living stand face to face. Honor is life; and dishonor, death.

Also, God, in His Book, describes the day as having a manifest sign, and the night as having one blotted away; He says: … *then We have made the sign of the night blotted away and We have made the sign of the day manifest …* (17:12). Looking at human society from this point of view, establishment of a kingdom and its downfall are mirrors of the manifestation of the day and the effacement of the night respectively.

In the same way, He counts life as the fountain-head of knowledge and power; and death deprives man of these faculties; He says: *Dead [are they)], not living, and they know not when they shall be raised* (16:21). And He has exclusively reserved the honor and might to Himself, and to His Messenger and the believers: *and to Allah belongs the might and to His Messenger and to the believers* (63:8). And it is these who, according to the Qur'an, are alive. Consequently, might and respect is the mirror of life, and humiliation and abasement represents death. It is now clear how giving of kingdom and taking it away as well as exalting and abasing (of the former verse) run parallel to making the night to enter into the day, and making the day to enter into the night as well as bringing forth the living from the dead, and the dead from the living (in the latter) respectively.

The concluding sentence of the latter verse, (*and Thou givest sustenance to whom Thou pleasest, without measure*) likewise stands face to face with the concluding sentence of the former (*in Thine hand is good …*), as the following paragraph makes it clear.

… and Thou givest sustenance to whom Thou pleasest, without measure: Apparently it gives the reason for the foregoing factors; the conjunctive, "and," is, therefore, for explanation; and it explains the afore-mentioned particular actions in term of a general faculty. The meaning: God manages His creatures in the foregoing way because He is the Sustainer, Who gives sustenance to whom He pleases, without measure.

That is why we said earlier that it stands face to face with the concluding sentence of the former verse; because, "in Thine hand is the good; surely, Thou has power over all things" also explains the reason

of the actions mentioned therein.

Sustenance in the Qur'an

al-Rizq, usually translated as sustenance, maintenance, or means of livelihood, is a well-known concept. A glance at its various usages shows that the word has a connotation of bestowal by someone to someone else, for example, the sustenance given by the king to the soldiers. Originally, it was used for only the foodstuff. For example, God says: *and their maintenance and their clothing must be borne by the father according to usage* (2:233). Mark that the clothing has not been counted as a part of the maintenance.

Thereafter, the meaning was extended to include every foodstuff, even if the giver was not known—in any case, it was a bestowal of good luck. The process of generalization continued, and now it is used for every useful thing—food or something else—which comes to someone; it includes all the paraphernalia of life, like: wealth, prestige, family, supporters, beauty, knowledge and so on. God says: *Or is it that you ask them a recompense? But the recompense of your Lord is best, and He is the best of those who provide sustenance* (23:72). Also, He quotes Jethro (Prophet Shuʿayb) as saying: *O my people! have you considered if I have a clear proof from my Lord and He has given me a goodly sustenance from Himself …* (11:88). Here the sustenance refers to the prophethood and the Divine knowledge etc.

God says: *Surely Allah, He is the Bestower of sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Strong* (51:58). The context confines the bestowal of sustenance to God only. The verse leads us to the following concepts:

First: Bestowal of sustenance, in reality, cannot be ascribed to any one other than God. Of course, there are some verses that attribute it to others also; for example: *and Allah is the Best of sustainers* (62:11). (There are many sustainers, but God is the Best.) Also, He gives the order: … *and maintain them out of it, and clothe them* (4:5). But such usages do not give them any independent status; the only Sustainer is God, others are just a means of conveying God's gift to His servants. It is not different from the Kingdom and the Might which actually belong to God, although others too get them by God's bestowal and permission.

Second: Whatever good the people get and which they make use

of, and derive benefit from, in their existence, is their sustenance; and it is God Who bestows it to them. There is a large number of the verses of sustenance to prove this fact. In addition, there are numerous verses on the theme of creation, management, decree, possession, will, and good, which prove that all these things belong exclusively to God—and giving sustenance is interwoven with these factors.

Third: Suppose a man takes advantage of a certain thing to obtain an unlawful benefit. Inasmuch as it was the cause or means of a sin, it would not be attributed to God. God has clearly said that on the level of legislation, He does not sanction any sin or evil. He says: *And when they commit an indecency they say: We found our fathers doing this, and Allah has enjoined it on us. Say: Surely Allah does not enjoin indecency; do you say against Allah what you do not know?* (7:28). Also, He says: *Surely Allah enjoins the doing of justice and the doing of good [to others] and the giving to the kindred, and He forbids indecency and evil and rebellion …* (16:90). It is just unimaginable that He would forbid a thing and then, at the same time, would allow it; or that He would declare something unlawful and then confine a servant's sustenance to it! And unlawful benefit is not "sustenance" on the level of legislation. Nevertheless, it is "sustenance" on the level of creation. The religious responsibility does not reach up to the level of creation—and there is nothing bad on that level. When the Qur'an says that God gives sustenance to every body, it looks at this subject from the level of creation. A Divine talk cannot be reduced to the level of the simpletons' understanding; in other words, it cannot overlook the deep Divine realities just because they are beyond the mental capacity of common man. The Holy Book contains what is a healing for the believers' hearts; nobody may fall into perdition by it except the unjust: *And We reveal of the Qur'an that which is a healing and a mercy to the believers, and it adds only to the perdition of the unjust* (17:82).

Moreover, there are verses showing that it was God Who gave kingdom to Nimrod, Pharaoh and others like them, and bestowed wealth and treasures to Korah (Qārūn) and his like. They got all these things not without the permission of God; He gave them the kingdom and wealth as a means of trial, to test their spiritual condition, and to complete His proof against them; it was as though God left them to go astray if they so wished, and gave them enough rope to hang themselves.

It should be noted here that, in the above examples, we took those cases to the level of legislation and yet found good explanations for them that would satisfy the reason and were not against the sublime Divine Justice. If such things are unobjectionable at the level of legislation, certainly there can be no objection in providing sustenance, at the level of creation—even if it be "unlawful" for legislation's point of view.

God has said that every thing has been created by Him, is sent down by Him from His treasures of mercy: *And there is not a thing but with Us are the treasures of it, and We do not send it down but in a known measure* (15:21). Further, He has said: *and whatever is with Allah is better …* (28:60). These two (and other similar) verses read together prove that whatever a man gets in this life, it comes from God and is good and beneficial for him. This theme may also be inferred from the verse: *Who made good every thing that He has created …* (32:7), read in conjunction with the verse: *That is Allah, your Lord, the Creator of every thing; there is no god but He* (40:62).

Yet, there is no denying that some Divine gifts appear to be evil and harmful to the recipient. But its evil and harm is just relative; it may be so for this particular person, while it brings good and benefit to a great many people; in other words, that personal hardship may be good, in the wider context of the world-system. Or it could have been misused by the man himself. God points to this factor when He says: *and whatever misfortune befalls you, it is from yourself* (4:79). However, we have already dealt with this subject in a previous volume.

In short, whatever good God bestows on His creatures (and all that He bestows is good and beneficial), it is called sustenance, in its literal sense: it is a gift that benefits the recipient. Probably, it is this theme that the verse 20:131 points at: *and the sustenance [given] by your Lord is better …*

The above discourse shows that, for almost all practical purposes, the three concepts—sustenance, good and creation—are one and the same. Every sustenance is good and created; and every creation is a sustenance and good. Nevertheless, there is a fine difference between sustenance and good on one side and creation on the other.

Sustenance presupposes the existence of something to be sustained, to whom the sustenance would be given. Food is sustenance for the digestive system because it needs that food; the digestive system is

sustenance for the man as he needs it; that man is sustenance for his parents because they benefit from him; likewise, the existence is a sustenance for the man, *per se.* God says: … *Who gave to everything its creation …* (20:50).

Likewise, good presupposes a selector who would choose what he wants from among a lot of things. Food is good for the digestive system because it needs it, and opts for it when given a choice; the digestive system is, in the same way, good for the man, and similarly the existence is good for him.

But as for creation, it does not require any actual or imaginary pre-existing thing. Food, digestive system, man, every thing is created in its own right; it by itself is the object of creation; it does not need any other object.

Every sustenance belongs to God; every good belongs to God. Whatever sustenance comes from Him, whatever good is given by Him, it is given gratis, not in exchange of or return for anything. Suppose you wanted to give to God something as price of the sustenance; well, what could you give Him? Whatever you may think of, it already belongs to God; you have no right whatsoever on any thing. It is just a mercy of God that He has undertaken to give sustenance to every one, and has made it obligatory for Himself to sustain all the creatures; He says: *And there is no animal in the earth but on Allah is the sustenance of it* (11:6); *and in the heaven is your sustenance and what you are threatened with. And by the Lord of the heavens and the earth! it is most surely the truth, just as you do speak* (51:22-23).

It shows that although sustenance is a right on God—because He Himself has undertaken to give sustenance to everyone—yet it is in fact a free gift from Him, because no creature is in his own right entitled to get it.

The above talk makes one thing clear: Even if a man obtains his sustenance unlawfully, originally he was allotted a lawful sustenance. It is unimaginable that God would undertake to give sustenance to a man, then compel him to get it through unlawful means; and then would tell him not to use it, and punish him if he disobeyed.

Let us explain it in another way: Sustenance is a Divine gift containing good; as such it is a Divine mercy for all the creatures. We have already mentioned that there are two kinds of mercy: There is a general

mercy which covers all the servants, believers and unbelievers, pious ones and sinners alike; and it is not confined to the human beings, it encompasses other creatures too. And there is a special mercy, the one that is reserved for the walkers on the path of felicity and righteousness, for example, true belief, piety and ultimately the paradise. Likewise, there are two kinds of sustenance: A general sustenance which is provided to every thing for its protection and survival; and a special sustenance which remains within the limits of legality.

The general mercy as well as the general sustenance is foreordained and measured; God says: *and Who created every thing, then ordained for it a measure* (25:2). Likewise, the special mercy and the special sustenance are foreordained and measured. For example, guidance is a special mercy; and on the level of legislation it is foreordained and decreed for every man, be he a believer or an unbeliever. That is why God raised the prophets and sent down the books. He says: *And I did not create the jinn and the human beings except that they should worship Me, I do not desire from them any sustenance and I do not desire that they should feed Me. Surely Allah, He is the Bestower of sustenance, the Lord of power, the Strong* (51:56-58). Also, He says: *And your Lord has commanded [decreed] that you shall not worship [any] but Him …* (17:23). It means that worship (which depends on guidance and is one of its concomitants) is a decreed measure—on the level of legislation. And so is the special sustenance (which is obtained lawfully), on the same level. God says: *They are lost indeed who kill their children foolishly without knowledge, and forbid what Allah has given to them, forging a lie against Allah; they have indeed gone astray, and they are not the followers of the right course* (6:140). Also, He says: *And Allah has made some of you excel others in the means of subsistence, so those who are made to excel do not give away their sustenance to those whom their right hands possess, so that they should be equal therein …* (16:71). These two verses are unconditional and general; they cover the believers as well as the unbelievers, and include the one who obtains his sustenance in lawful way as well as the one who does so unlawfully.

One thing more: As was explained in the beginning, sustenance is the gift or bestowal which the sustained benefits from. It follows that only that much of it can be truly called sustenance which is used up by the sustained. A man has been given a lot of wealth, but he eats

only a small portion of it; therefore, his sustenance, strictly speaking, is the portion he ate up; the remainder cannot be called his sustenance except in the sense that he was given it. In other words, when we say, Zayd has got ample (or little) sustenance, it does not necessarily mean that he has got a lot of (or little) wealth.

There are some other aspects of this topic, which we shall write about under the verse: *And there is no animal in the earth but on Allah is the sustenance of it, and He knows its resting place and its depository; all [things] are in a manifest book* (11:6).

Now we come back to the clause under discussion, that is, "and Thou givest sustenance to whom thou pleasest, without measure." The sustenance is "without measure" because God gives it to the creatures gratis, and they by themselves have got no right to it. Whatever they could offer in exchange, even their requests, invocations and thanks, in reality belongs to God, they have got nothing of their own to offer in consideration of the sustenance. Therefore, there is no measure for the sustenance given by God. Clearly, the clause does not imply that the given sustenance is unlimited and unmeasured. How can it be when the verses of "measure" clearly refute it? For example, God says: *Surely We created every thing according to a measure* (54:49); *and whoever fears Allah, He will make for him an outlet, and give him sustenance from whence he thinks not; and whoever trusts in Allah, He is sufficient for him; surely Allah attains His purpose; Allah indeed has made a measure for every thing* (65:2-3).

Sustenance, therefore, is a free gift from God, yet it is measured according to the pleasure of God.

The two verses together make the following concepts clear:

First: The possession as well as the Kingdom exclusively belongs to God.

Second: Every good is in His hand, and comes from Him.

Third: Sustenance is a gift from God, without any recompense or exchange.

Fourth: Kingdom, might, honor, and every single conventional good, occurring in the social framework, (like: wealth, prestige, power, and so on.) are various aspects of the sustenance, given by God to His servants.

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Examining Narrations

(1) ʿAbdul-Aʿlā (*mawlā,* client of the Āl [tribe of] Sām) has narrated from Abū ʿAbdillāh. He says: "I told him: *'Say O Allah; Master of the Kingdom! Thou givest the kingdom to whomsoever Thou pleasest and takest away the kingdom from whomsoever Thou pleasest.* Is it not that God gave the kingdom to the Umayyads?' He said: 'It is not as you think. Surely God Mighty and Great is He! gave the kingdom to us, and the Umayyads usurped it; it is as though a cloth belongs to a man, and another person takes it away; yet the cloth does not belong to the man who took it away.' " (*al-Kāfī*)

Author's comment: al-ʿAyyāshī has narrated a similar tradition through Dāwūd b. Farqad from Abū ʿAbdillāh.

We have already explained that giving the kingdom is of two kinds:

(1) Giving it at the level of creation: Such a kingdom means that the king enjoys an over-riding authority over the people and they are subdued by his power—it makes no difference whether his rule is based on justice or not. For example, God says referring to Nimrod: … *because Allah had given him the kingdom* (2:258). The effect of such a kingdom is that the king's words are obeyed, his command carried out and his will enforced. (We shall later explain what a kingdom on the level of creation really entails.)

(2) Giving it at the level of legislation, that is, decreeing that he is a king whose obedience is obligatory. For example, God says: *Surely Allah has raised Ṭālūt to be a king over you* (2:247). The effect of this type of kingdom is obligation of the people to obey the king's command and confirmation of his mastership of the people. Such a kingdom is always based on justice; and is liked and praised by God.

Now the kingdom the Umayyads had got was of the former type, that is, the one decreed at the level of creation, with its accompanying effect of overall authority on the people. But the questioner was confused; and erroneously thought that it had the effect of the other type of kingdom—he assumed that the Umayyads were entitled to the obedience of the people, that they were the rightful masters of the *ummah,* and had got a lawful and praiseworthy status in the eyes of God. The Imam told him that such a kingdom (on the level of legislation) did not belong to the Umayyads—it belonged to the rightful successors

of the Prophet, that is, the Imams, and only they were entitled to the unquestioning obedience of the *ummah.*

In other words, the same kingdom which in the Umayyad's hands was devoid of every virtue, would have been praiseworthy if it were in the Imams' hands. In the Umayyads' hands it was totally condemnable, because they had usurped it from its rightful owners. Nevertheless, its bestowal would be attributed to God as a plan to give them enough rope to hang themselves, as He did in the case of Nimrod and Pharaoh.

The Umayyads themselves had misunderstood the connotations of this verse, and thought that their kingdom was the sign of Divine approval of their rule, as may be seen in *Kitāb al-Irshād* (of al-Mufīd) where it mentions the events after the martyrdom of Imam al-Ḥusayn and his companions: al-Mufīd says: "When the heads (of the martyrs) were put before Yazīd and among them was the head of al-Ḥusayn, Yazīd recited: "We will split even the skull of a man we held in great respect; But they were disobedient and oppressive."

Again al-Mufīd says: "Then (Yazīd) looked towards the people of his court and said: 'Verily, this (al-Ḥusayn) used to boast against me and say: "My father is better than the father of Yazīd, and my mother is better than his mother, and my grandfather is better than his grandfather, and I am better than him." As for his claim that his father was better than the father of Yazīd, indeed my father disputed with his father and God decreed in favor of my father against his father. And as for his saying that his mother was better than Yazīd's mother, by my life he was right; certainly Fāṭimah, daughter of the Messenger of God was better than my mother. And as regards his saying that his grandfather was better than my grandfather, no one believing in God and the Last Day can say that he is better than Muḥammad. And as for his saying that he was better than me, perhaps he had not read this verse: *Say: O Allah, Master of the Kingdom! Thou givest the kingdom to whomsoever Thou pleasest …*" ' "

And Zaynab, daughter of ʿAlī (peace be on him and her) rebutted his claims using the same explanation as al-Ṣādiq did in this tradition. al-Sayyid b. Ṭāwūs and others have reported her reply, in which she, *inter alia,* said: "Do you think, O Yazīd! that—just because you cut us off from the regions of the earth and the horizons of the sky, so that we are being held like the captives—we are abased before God? Or that

you are exalted before Him? Or that it has happened because of your great importance with Him? So (now) you behave arrogantly and look around hilariously and cheerfully, when you find the world in your bondage and (your) affairs well in order, and when our kingdom and our authority is totally usurped by you! Take it easy! Don't be hasty!! Have you forgotten the words of God: *And let not those who disbelieve think that Our granting them respite is better for their souls; We grant them respite only that they may add to their sins; and they shall have a disgraceful chastisement* (3:178)."

(2) It is reported in *Majmaʿ al-bayān* about the words of God, *and Thou bringest forth the living from the dead …:* "It is said that it means: Thou bringest forth the believer from the unbeliever and Thou bringest forth the unbeliever from the believer." Further, it is written: "And this meaning has been narrated from Abū Jaʿfar (al-Bāqir) and Abū ʿAbdillāh (al-Ṣādiq), peace be on them."

Author's comment: A nearly similar tradition has been narrated by al-Ṣadūq from al-ʿAskarī.

(3) Ibn Marduwayh has narrated through the chain of Abū ʿUthmān al-Nahdī from Ibn Masʿūd or Salmān from the Prophet about the words, *He brings forth the living from the dead and He brings forth the dead from the living,* that he said: "The believer from the unbeliever and the unbeliever from the believer." (*al-Durr al-manthūr*)

(4) It is reported through the foregoing chain from Salmān al-Fārisī that he said: "The Messenger of God said: 'When God created Adam, He took out his offspring, then He took a handful in His right hand and said: "These are the people of the garden; and I don't care." And He took a handful in the other (hand) and came into it every bad (person); and He said: "These are the people of the Fire; and I don't care." Then He mixed one (group) with the other. Thus comes out an unbeliever from a believer, and a believer from an unbeliever; and that is (the meaning of) His words, *Thou bringest forth the living from the dead and Thou bringest forth the dead from the living.*" (*ibid.*)

Author's comment: Several exegetes have narrated this meaning from Salmān, with the chain of narrators disconnected. The tradition is one of those related to the "tiny particles" and the covenant; and, God willing, we shall explain them in a more suitable place.

Muḥammad b. John narrated from Aḥmad b. Muḥammad and several of our companions, from Sahl b. Ziyād, from Ibn Maḥbūb, from Abū Ḥamzah al-Thumālī that Abū Jaʿfar said: "The Messenger of God, may God bless him and his progeny, said in (his) last pilgrimage: 'Verily, the Trustworthy Spirit (that is, Gabriel) has revealed to my heart that no soul was to die until it had completed its sustenance. Therefore, be on guard against (the wrath of) God, and act decently in seeking (the sustenance). Even if you feel that a sustenance is late in coming to you, it should not induce you to seek it through some thing that is a sin against God; for surely God has distributed the sustenance among His creation, with lawful means, and He has not distributed it with unlawful means. Therefore, whoever fears God and remains patient, his sustenance comes to him from lawful means; and whoever tears apart the curtain (put by) God and takes it (that is, the sustenance) through unlawful means, his lawful sustenance is reduced (proportionately) and (also) he will be answerable for that.' " (*al-Kāfī*)

ʿAlī said: "O son of Adam! Livelihood is of two kinds: the livelihood which you seek and the livelihood which seeks you; if you do not reach it, it will come to you. Therefore, do not impose a year's worry on your one day's worry. Whatever you get every day should be enough for you for the day. If you have a whole year of your life even then God, the Sublime, will give you every next day what He has destined as your share. If you do not have a year in your life then why should you worry for what is not for you. No seeker will reach your livelihood before you nor will anyone overpower you in the matter of that livelihood. Similarly, what has been destined as your share will not be delayed for you?" (*Nahj al-balāghah*)

Ibn Ṭarīf narrated from Ibn ʿUlwān, from Jaʿfar, that his father (al-Bāqir) said: "The Messenger of God, may God bless him and his progeny, said: 'Verily, the sustenance comes down from the heaven to the earth (abundantly) like the number of the rain-drops, to every soul according to what has been allotted to it. Yet, God is very Munificent; so you should beseech God for His munificence.' " (*Qurb al-asnād*)

Author's comment: Numerous traditions have been narrated of the same connotation. We shall discuss, God willing, in the Chapter of Hūd (ch. 11), the traditions of sustenance in detail.

An Essay on Kingdom and its Place in Society

It has already been explained that possession and property are among those conventional but essential concepts which man cannot do without—it makes no difference whether he lives alone or in a society. Possession basically is a recognized relationship between the owner and the property.

Likewise, kingdom is a conventional, nevertheless essential, concept; a subjective institution which man cannot do without. But it is as a member of society, not as an individual, that man needs this institution. No sooner do the people establish a society than they start disputing with one another; everyone wants what is in the other's hands even if it means trespassing the limits and crushing other's rights under his heels. This tendency leads to chaos and conflict. The society which was established to ensure happy and peaceful life, becomes a source of misery and disorder; the medicine turns into a poison.

This anomaly cannot be removed except by creating an overall authority which could compel each member to remain within the limits—thus curbing the reckless ambitions of the oppressor and giving new hope and vigor to the oppressed. That authority, which is called kingdom or rulership, lets everyone enjoy his due rights and keeps every member in his proper place.

Exploitation of weaker sections has been a constant feature of human history. In ancient times some strong persons imposed their will on the society and subdued their compatriots to accept them as their overlord or king. Although such kings and their officers themselves were mostly epitome of oppression and injustice, still their presence was of some benefit to the society. They, in their own interest, did not allow any section to oppress the others—because they did not want anyone to become strong enough to rise one day against their own authority. In this way peace reigned in the society; everyone was afraid of the autocratic king and no one had any opportunity or inclination to think about the general welfare of the society. If an individual ruler was less oppressive, the subjects sang his praise; if he was unjust beyond their tolerance, they complained and cried.

Sometime a king or ruler was killed or overpowered; and the subjects experienced chaos and disorder, to prevent which they made some strong and able man to take the rein of power in his hands, and he

ascended the throne; and thus began the same story of oppression and injustice.

This continued for a long time. Ultimately, society was fed up with the autocratic and dictatorial monarchy. In order to restrain the king's hands, people devised constitutions, delineating the mutual rights and duties of the ruler and the ruled, and somehow or other forced the king to agree. The autocratic monarchy thus became a constitutional one. Yet, it was a hereditary institution.

Then the public became aware of another big defect: Once a king ascended the throne, there was no way to remove him, no matter how unjust or unfit he might prove. Another defect was its hereditary nature; the first born child of a king got the kingdom, irrespective of his physical, moral and intellectual abilities. They found the answer in republic. Now they had an elected president for a fixed period instead of a hereditary king who ruled for life.

Various nations invented various other system to restrain their rulers; and future might be holding various hitherto unimaginable systems in store for us.

All these attempts throughout the world, to regulate the functions of the ruler, prove one thing, if nothing else. Humanity really needs the institution of rulership, no matter by what name it is called in a certain country at a certain time. One overriding authority must subdue all other people's individual ambitions and aims; otherwise, society will suffer from discord, conflict and disorder. That is why we said at the outset that kingdom is an essential concept of the society. And like all other such concepts, society is constantly trying to perfect it by removing from it the harmful elements.

The institution of prophethood has played the most important part in this process. When an idea spreads in the public—especially if it is in accord with the nature, and satisfied the human expectations—it becomes the strongest bond to unit the differing groups, to unify the divergent views and to turn the individuals into a well disciplined society, which no power can defy.

Prophethood since its earliest days calls the people to do justice and to abstain from injustice; it teaches them to worship God and to submit only to Him; and it forbids them to follow the arrogant pharaohs and exploiting nimrods. This cry has constantly been raised generation

after generation, in one nation after another, exhorting the big bosses to submit to the rule of justice, and encouraging the weaker sections to stand up for their rights. It is impossible for such a powerful factor to remain active in the society for so many centuries and not to affect the human psychology, not to mould mankind's way of thinking.

The Qur'an often quotes revelations to this effect sent to the previous prophets, Noah is quoted complaining before his Lord: *My Lord! surely they have disobeyed me and followed him whose wealth and children have added to him nothing but loss. And they have planned a very great plan. And they say: By no means leave your gods …* (71:21-23). The same thing appears in his disputation with the big bosses of his people: *They said: Shall we believe in you while the meanest follow you? He said: And what knowledge have I of what they do? Their account is only with my Lord, if you could perceive* (26:111-113). Likewise, Hūd admonished his people: *Do you build on every height a monument? Vain is it that you do: And you make strong fortresses that perhaps you may abide: And when you lay hands [on men] you lay hands [like] tyrants* (26:128-130). And Ṣaliḥ advised his people: *Therefore, guard against [the punishment of] Allah and obey me: And do not obey the bidding of the extravagant: Who make mischief in the land and do not act right* (26:150-152).

In the same way Moses stood up against Pharaoh to oppose his tyranny and to defend and liberate the Israelites; the same stance was taken by Abraham against Nimrod; and by Jesus and other Israelite prophets *vis-a-vis* the oppressors of their times. All of them condemned and attacked the arrogance and injustice of their kings and rulers, and called their people to throw away the yokes of tyranny and stand boldly against the exploiters and transgressors.

So far as the Qur'an is concerned, it is no secret how it exhorts the people not to yield to the transgressors, not to surrender to the oppressors; it encourages the oppressed to stand up boldly against the oppressor to safeguard his self-respect and human dignity; and it warns the arrogant of the bitter fruits of haughtiness, of the chastisement that awaits the oppression and injustice. For example: *Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with ʿĀd, [the people of] Iram, possessors of many columned buildings, the like of which were not created in the cities; and [with] Thamūd, who hewed out the rocks in the valley; and [with] Pharaoh, the lord of stakes; who transgressed in the cities, so they made*

great mischief therein? Therefore your Lord let fall upon them the whip of chastisement. Most surely your Lord is on watch (89:6-14).

The Qur'anic comment, at the end of the story of Ṭālūt, is in itself enough to prove that the kingdom (or rulership) is essential for the mankind: *And were it not for Allah's repelling some men with others, the earth would certainly be in a state of disorder; but Allah is Gracious to the creatures* (2:251). We have shown in its commentary how it confirms this institution in a general way.

Many verses in the Qur'an talk about kingdom, guardianship and obligation of obedience etc. Some of them count the kingdom as a bounty and gift from God: … *and We have given them a grand Kingdom* (4:54); … *and made you kings and gave you what He had not given to any other among the nations* (5:20); … *and Allah grants His Kingdom to whom He pleases* … (2:247). Nevertheless, it is an honor only when it is accompanied by piety. Piety is the only basis of honor, to the exclusion of all other illusory sources of respect. God says: *O you people! surely We have created you of a male and a female and made you nations and tribes that you may recognize each other; surely the most honorable of you with Allah is the most pious of you* … (49:13).

But it is only God Who decides the worth of a servant's piety. Consequently, no one should use his piety as a lever to hoist himself over his compatriots. Nobody should boast about anything whatsoever: If the cause of boasting is some worldly thing, then it is obviously worthless; if it concerns the next world, then it is in the hands of God. In any case, a Muslim, who is given this grace of God which we call Kingdom, has nothing to boast about, nor any reason to think himself as superior to the others. All he has got for himself is an unenviable burden of responsibilities of the state. What brightens this gloomy picture is the hope that his Lord will give him great reward in the next life if he manages the affairs of the state with justice and piety.

This is the spirit which animated the whole lives of the true friends of God. We shall write later on, God willing, on this topic, looking at the lives of the Prophet and his purified progeny; we shall describe, with the help of the correct traditions, what they gained for themselves from their kingdoms: "nothing"; their only interest in the kingdom and authority was to use it to crush the tyrants, to cut the root of mischief in the earth, to bring the arrogant and transgressors back within the

limits of religion. And that is the only worth of the kingdom.

The Qur'an treats the kingdom as a tool which is necessary for running the affairs of society—just as education and martial power is necessary for its intellectual and defence needs. Kingdom is an instrument of society; it is not the foundation upon which the society stands. The Qur'an does not invite the Muslims to unite to establish an empire to shame the Byzantine and Iranian empires; it calls them to unite in Islam, and admonishes them not to differ in religion. This unity in religion is the foundation which the Islamic society is built upon. God says: *And [know] that this is My path, the straight one, therefore follow it; and follow not [other] ways, for they will scatter you away from His way* (6:153); *Say: O People of the Book! come to a word, common between us and you, that we shall not worship any but Allah and [that] we shall not associate anything with Him and [that] some of us shall not take others for lords besides Allah; but if they turn back, then say: Bear witness that we are Muslims* (3:64). Clearly, the Qur'an calls the people to surrender to no one except God; the society which it recognizes is the one that is based on religion. It demolishes all other loyalties; a Muslim is not to submit to anyone besides God; he is not to bow down before any magnificent palace or grandiose castle; he is not to humiliate himself before any Caesar or Khusraw. Consequently, the Qur'an does not recognize the artificial boundaries which have cut the earth of God into small pieces which they call countries, nor the resulting "nationhood" that divides the humanity into territorial segments, putting one group against the others.

A Philosophical Discourse on Attribution of Kingdom and other Abstracts Concepts to God

The Creator, as the Essential Being, is the ultimate Cause of all that is there in the universe; the relationship between Him and the universe (the whole as well as its components) is that of the cause and effect. It is a proved axiom of philosophy that causality governs the existence only—the real existence of the effect emanates from the existence of its cause; other things, for example, quiddity, are outside the domain of the cause. Consequently, that which has no real existence, does not come within the system of the cause and effect; and as it is not the effect of any cause, it has no chain of causality reaching up to the

ultimate Cause.

Problem arises about the abstract ideas and imaginary concepts, which have no real existence outside the imagination. Being devoid of real existence, they cannot be said to be caused by the ultimate Cause, that is, God. But one of those imaginary concepts, is the shariah with its commandments and prohibitions, its rules, principles and conventions. So are the kingdom, the honor, the sustenance etc. Should not these things be attributed to God? If the answer is yes, then how?

Reply: These concepts, although devoid of real existence, leave in their track some effects which are inseparable from them; and these effects have real existence. As these effects can be, and are, attributed to God, the concepts from which they emanate can as easily be attributed to Him. Kingdom, for example, is an imaginary concept, which has no real existence outside our imagination; we have established this institution to achieve a real benefit. It is through this abstract idea of kingdom that we try to curb the unscrupulous offenders of the society, to rein the unrestrained designs of the transgressors, and to avenge the oppressed from the oppressor. These are real facts and they can, and are, attributed to God. As these effects of kingdom are ascribed to God, so can be the kingdom itself, by association.

The same applies to the honor, the rules of the shariah and its principles etc.

In short, all such abstract ideas and concepts may be attributed to God, by attributing their effects to Him, in a way that is in keeping with the sanctity of His name.

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Verses 28-32

لَا يَتَّخِذِ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ الْكَافِرِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ۖ وَمَنْ يَفْعَلْ ذَٰلِكَ فَلَيْسَ
مِنَ اللَّهِ فِي شَيْءٍ إِلَّا أَنْ تَتَّقُوا مِنْهُمْ تُقَاةً ۗ وَيُحَذِّرُكُمُ اللَّهُ نَفْسَهُ ۗ وَإِلَى اللَّهِ
الْمَصِيرُ ﴿٢٨﴾ قُلْ إِنْ تُخْفُوا مَا فِي صُدُورِكُمْ أَوْ تُبْدُوهُ يَعْلَمْهُ اللَّهُ ۗ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا فِي
السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢٩﴾ يَوْمَ تَجِدُ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَا
عَمِلَتْ مِنْ خَيْرٍ مُحْضَرًا وَمَا عَمِلَتْ مِنْ سُوءٍ تَوَدُّ لَوْ أَنَّ بَيْنَهَا وَبَيْنَهُ أَمَدًا بَعِيدًا ۗ
وَيُحَذِّرُكُمُ اللَّهُ نَفْسَهُ ۗ وَاللَّهُ رَءُوفٌ بِالْعِبَادِ ﴿٣٠﴾ قُلْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُحِبُّونَ اللَّهَ
فَاتَّبِعُونِي يُحْبِبْكُمُ اللَّهُ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿٣١﴾ قُلْ أَطِيعُوا
اللَّهَ وَالرَّسُولَ ۖ فَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْكَافِرِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

(3:28) *Let not the believers take the unbelievers for friends rather than the believers; and whoever does this, he shall have nothing [to do] with Allah, except [when] you guard yourselves against [them] for fear from them; and Allah cautions you of Himself; and to Allah is the eventual coming.*

(3:29) *Say: Whether you hide what is in your hearts or manifest it, Allah knows it; and He knows whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth; and Allah has power over all things.*

(3:30) *On the day that every soul shall find present what it has done of good and what it has done of evil; [it] shall wish that between it and that [evil] there were a long duration of time; and Allah cautions you of Himself; and Allah is Compassionate to the servants.*

(3:31) *Say: If you love Allah, then follow me, Allah will love you and forgive you your sins; and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.*

(3:32) *Say: Obey Allah and the Messenger; but if they turn back, then surely Allah does not love the unbelievers.*

Commentary

The verses are not disconnected with the preceding ones, which admonished the People of the Book and the polytheists. If the word "unbelievers," coming at the beginning of these verses, covers the People of the Book too, then these verses forbid the believers to befriend, and fraternize with, the polytheists and the People of the Book all together; if it refers to the polytheists only, then the verses admonish the believers not to be friendly with them; instead they should join the party of God, loving Him and His Messenger.

لَا يَتَّخِذِ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ الْكَافِرِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ۖ وَمَنْ يَفْعَلْ ذَٰلِكَ فَلَيْسَ مِنَ اللَّهِ فِي شَيْءٍ إِلَّا أَنْ تَتَّقُوا مِنْهُمْ تُقَاةً ۗ وَيُحَذِّرُكُمُ اللَّهُ نَفْسَهُ ۗ وَإِلَى اللَّهِ الْمَصِيرُ ﴿٢٨﴾

(3:28) ***Let not the believers take the unbelievers for friends rather than the believers; and whoever does this, he shall have nothing [to do] with Allah, except [when] you guard yourselves against [them] for fear from them; and Allah cautions you of Himself; and to Allah is the eventual coming.***

al-Awliyā (friends), the plural of *al-walīy*, is derived from *al-wilāyah*. The root word denotes authority to manage something, that is, guardianship. Guardian of a minor, insane or idiot is called his *al-walīy,* because he has the authority to manage their affairs and property, although the property belongs to the said ward.

Then the word was used—with increasing frequency—in the context of love; if two people love each other, each feels free to look after the other's affairs. Love empowers the beloved to manage the affairs, and influence the life, of the lover.

In this verse, taking the unbelievers for friends means establishing a psychological rapport with them. Such a friendship would taint the believer's vision, and would adversely affect his thoughts and character, encouraging him to follow his unbeliever friends in his life and manners. The clause, "rather than the believers," points to this fact. It refers to a stage when the believer prefers the unbelievers rather than the believers as the object of his love and as the model for his life; the more he moves nearer to his unbeliever friends, the more he distances

himself from the believers.

Many verses strictly forbid the believers to take the unbelievers, and the Jews and the Christians for friends; but in every instance, there are clauses which delineate which type of friendship is forbidden. For example, this verse contains the above-mentioned clause, "rather than the believers"; the verse: *O you who believe! do not take the Jews and the Christians for friends* (5:51), goes on to say: *they are friends of each other;* and the prohibition: *O you who believe! do not take My enemy and your enemy for friends …* (60:1), is further on explained by the words: *Allah does not forbid you respecting those who have not made war against you on account of your religion and have not driven you forth from your homes …* (60:8).

The adjectives used in the verse under discussion point to the reason of the prohibition. The believers should not take the unbelievers for friends rather than the believers. Belief and disbelief are diametrically opposed to each other; they can never reconcile. The same mutual repulsion would permeate the whole lives of the believers *vis-a-vis* the unbelievers. Their thoughts and deeds, their spiritual journey towards God, and in short their whole being would be totally different from the opposite party. Such a position is not in harmony with that of friendship; because friendship demands unity and rapport.

And when such a friendship begins and grows with complete disregard to the friendship with the believers, it first spoils the fruits of the faith, then damages its branches and finally destructs its very roots. That is why God warned them in the next sentence, "and whoever does this, he shall have nothing (to do) with God." Then comes the exception of *taqiyyah* (dissimulation), because *taqiyyah* is only a show of love, not its reality.

… rather than the believers: *Dūn* is a proposition of place, meaning: below, under (in rank, value); this side of, short of; without, with the exclusion of; leaving aside. *min dūn* signifies, 'beginning from a place below that of the believers,' because the believers are far above them in rank. Originally this preposition denoted nearness combined with lowness, for example, *dūnaka Zayd* (Zayd is near you but below; he does not measure up to you). Then it was used for 'other than,' 'besides,' for example, *… two gods besides Allah …* (5:116); *… and forgives what is besides that to whomsoever He pleases …* (4:48). Also, it is used as a

nomen verbi; in this sense, *dūnaka Zayd* would mean: adhere to Zayd. These later usages are based on some association with the original meaning, not that the word was made for them.

… and whoever does this, he shall have nothing [to do] with Allah: "Does this," that is, takes the unbelievers for friends in preference to the believers. This misconduct is hated so much by the Speaker that He does not like to mention it in words, and just alludes to it; people often use pronouns to refer to indecent things. Also God did not say, whoever of the believer does this; it was far beneath the dignity of the believers to attribute such a misconduct to them.

The clause, *he shall have nothing [to do] with God*, literally means, he is not from God in anything. Idiomatically, this expression shows that he is not of the group or party of God. God says: *And whoever takes Allah and His Messenger and those who believe for a guardian, then surely the party of Allah are they that shall be triumphant* (5:56). Also Abraham is quoted as saying: … *then whoever follows me, he is surely of me* … (14:36).

Anyhow, the sentence means: Whoever does this, he shall in no way remain with the party of God; his thoughts and deeds will be those of the enemies of Islam.

… except [when] you guard yourselves against [them] for fear from them: *al-Ittiqā*ʾ (to seek protection because of fear); the word is sometimes used for fear, by association; probably *taqiyyah*[1] has the same connotations.

The exception in this sentence is disjoined: To show attachment to someone because of his fear without loving him in reality is quite different from befriending him and having a rapport with him; love and fear are two opposite feelings and have opposite effects on the heart; how can they be found in one place?

The verse clearly allows *taqiyyah,* as is shown by the traditions of the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt. Also, it is clearly proven by the verse revealed about ʿAmmār, and his parents, Yāsir and Sumayyah: *He who disbelieves in Allah after his having believed—not he who is compelled while*

1 *Taqiyyah* (dissimulation) is the practice of denying or concealing one's faith under certain circumstances. It is permissible when one is faced with persecution as proven by the verse quoted by the author: … *not he who is compelled while his heart is at rest on account of faith.* (16:106) (Ed.)

his heart is at rest on account of faith, but he who opens [his] breast for disbelief—on these is the wrath of Allah, and they shall have a grievous chastisement (16:106).

The Qur'an and the sunnah both agree that *taqiyyah* is permissible in places. Also, reason supports it. The main purpose of the religion and the Messenger is to keep the truth alive; and sometimes this purpose can be achieved by practising *taqiyyah,* by keeping good relations with the enemies of the religion, while discarding *taqiyyah* would serve no purpose at all. It is a reality which no reasonable man can deny. We shall further write about it under 'Traditions,' and also under the verse 16:106 mentioned just now (… *not he who is compelled while his heart is at rest on account of faith …*).

… and Allah cautions you of Himself: *al-Taḥdhīr* is the transitive of *al-ḥadhar* (to beware of a frightful thing). God has warned His servants of His chastisement, as He says: … *surely the chastisement of your Lord is to be dreaded of* (17:57). And He has warned them of the hypocrites and the mischief of the unbelievers, as He says: … *they are the enemy, therefore beware of them* (63:4); … *and be cautious of them, lest they seduce you* … (5:49). But in this verse as well as in a following one He cautions them of His Own Self. The crime of befriending the unbelievers to the exclusion of the believers is so serious that no curtain or protection remains between God and the criminal, there is nothing to save him from God, there is no helper or intercessor to intercede on his behalf; he is left without any shield, to face directly the chastisement of God. This style puts utmost emphasis to the threat, and its repetition in a following verse further intensifies it; then it has been further highlighted by the concluding clauses, "and to God is the eventual coming" (in this verse) and "God is Compassionate to the servants" (in the other), as we shall explain later on.

Look at this verse and the others obliging the Muslims not to take the unbelievers for friends. You will see that this sin is tantamount to rejecting the guardianship of God, going out from the band of His servants, and joining the party of His enemies—to damage the affairs of the religion. This transgression is a dry-rot that destroys the fibre of religion; it is more damaging and harmful to Islam than the open disbelief and polytheism of the unbelievers and pagans. One can easily prepare for an open enemy and can repulse his attacks on one's fortress;

but it is not so easy if the enemy is inside and poses as a friend. If a Muslim establishes fraternal bonds with the enemies of Islam, his character is gradually influenced by their manners, deeds and thoughts. A time comes when disbelief replaces the belief; the Muslims slowly discard the tenets and symbols of Islam one after the other, and before they realize it, Islam loses its hold on the society. It is death without any hope of revival, perdition without any chance of resurrection.

It is "the transgression"; and his case is directly in the hands of God: *Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with ʿĀd, [the people of] Iram, possessors of many columned buildings, the like of which were not created in the cities; and with Thamūd, who hewed out the rocks in the valley, and [with] Pharaoh, the lord of stakes; who transgressed in the cities, so they made great mischief therein? Therefore your Lord let fall upon them the whip of chastisement. Most surely your Lord is on watch* (89:6-14). The transgression leads the transgressor to a place where God is on watch—and where there is no one but God; and He smites the guilty with the whip of His chastisement—and there is no one to protect the transgressor from Him.

It is for the same reason that those who take the unbelievers for friends have been warned of God Himself: Such a friendship is open transgression, a transgression that damages and destroys the religion of God.

The same theme has been explained in the verse: *Stand fast then [in the right path] as you are commanded, as also he who has turned [to Allah] with you, and do not transgress [O men!], surely He sees what you do. And do not incline to those who are unjust, lest the Fire touch you, and you have no guardians besides Allah, then you shall not be helped* (11:112-113). This verse, according to the traditions, is the one which, the Prophet said, had aged him.

However, this verse and the one under discussion, clearly show that inclination towards the unjust and the unbelievers is a transgression which throws one into the Fire where he will not find any helper; it is the chastisement given by God Himself, and no one can save from it.

The sentence, *and God cautions you of Himself*, shows that the threatened punishment is a firmly-decreed affair which cannot be cancelled. What the offender has been warned of is God Himself; there is nothing between God and the culprit; and there is no protector from

God; He has threatened to punish this offender, and what He has said is surely to happen. The same thing appears from the verse 11:113 quoted above: … *lest the Fire touch you … then you shall not be helped.*

… and to Allah is the eventual coming: You cannot escape from Him; nobody can stop you from this eventual return to God. As mentioned earlier, it reemphasizes the threat.

These verses, "Let not the believers take the unbelievers for friends …," are among those which, in the form of admonition, contain a prediction of what was to happen in this *ummah* in the coming days; we shall explain it in detail, God willing, in Chapter 5 (The Table).

قُلْ إِنْ تُخْفُوا مَا فِي صُدُورِكُمْ أَوْ تُبْدُوهُ يَعْلَمْهُ اللَّهُ ۗ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

(3:29) ***Say: Whether you hide what is in your hearts or manifest it, Allah knows it; and He knows whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth; and Allah has power over all things.***

The theme is the same as in the verse: … *and whether you manifest what is in your souls or hide it, Allah will call you to account for it* (2:284).[1] Nevertheless, a fine difference in style attracts our attention. The verse 2:284 talks about calling to account, and accounting is more often than not a manifest affair; therefore in this verse 'manifesting' comes before hiding. But the verse under discussion talks about the knowledge of God, and knowledge is more germane to what is hidden in the hearts; therefore this verse has reversed the order, mentioning first what is hidden in the hearts, then coming to what is manifest.

God ordered His Messenger to convey this message to the offending servants; it is because He did not like to address directly those who, He knew, would surely disobey His order and would befriend the unbelievers. It shows His displeasure in the same way as the words in the preceding verse: "and whoever does this …"

… and He knows whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth; and Allah has power over all things: It has the same connotation as the verse 2:284, mentioned above.

يَوْمَ تَجِدُ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَا عَمِلَتْ مِنْ خَيْرٍ مُحْضَرًا وَمَا عَمِلَتْ مِنْ سُوءٍ تَوَدُّ لَوْ أَنَّ

1 See Eng. vol. 4. (Ed.)

بَيْنَهَا وَبَيْنَهُ أَمَدًا بَعِيدًا ۗ وَيُحَذِّرُكُمُ اللَّهُ نَفْسَهُ ۗ وَاللَّهُ رَءُوفٌ بِالْعِبَادِ ﴿٣٠﴾

(3:30) ***On the day that every soul shall find present what it has done of good and what it has done of evil; [it] shall wish that between it and that [evil] there were a long duration of time; and Allah cautions you of Himself; and Allah is Compassionate to the servants.***

Apparently, it is a part of the message which the Prophet was to convey. "On the day" may refer to a deleted but understood verb, "remember" or "describe"—Remember (or Describe) *the day that every soul* … Alternatively this adverb of time may qualify the preceding verb, "God knows it" or "He knows," that is, God shall know on that day what is in your hearts; or He will know on that day what is in the heavens and the earth. There is no difficulty in this interpretation; it is not that He would not know these things before the Day of Judgment; what the expression means is this: We, the servants of God, will manifestly see the effects of His all-encompassing knowledge on that day. According to this explanation, this verse describes the manifestation of His knowledge on that day in the same way as the following verses describe manifestation of His power on that very day: *[of] the day when they shall come forth; nothing concerning them shall remain hidden to Allah. To whom belongs the Kingdom this day? To Allah, the Subduer [of all]* (40:16); … *there is no protector today*[1] *from Allah* … (11:43); … *and o that those who are unjust could see, when they see the chastisement, that the power is wholly Allah's* … (2:165); … *and the command on that day shall be entirely Allah's* (82:19). Obviously, to God belongs all the Kingdom, power and command, always—before and after the Day of Judgment as well as on that day. But these verses especially refer to that day in this connection, because it will be on that day that we, the servants of God, will clearly see His Kingdom and rule, without any doubt about His exclusive authority and power.

Likewise, if the verb, "He knows," is qualified by the adverb, "that day …," it would not mean that God would not know the hidden secrets of His servants or their good and evil deeds before the Day of Judgment.

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1 "Today" in this verse refers to the day of the Deluge of Noah, not to the Day of Resurrection. (Trans.)

On the day that every soul shall find present what it has done: The word translated here as "present" is *muḥḍaran* (which literally means, presented, brought in). The choice of this word, rather than *ḥāḍiran* (present), points to the fact that the good and bad deeds are existent and safe from extinction, because only such a thing may be brought in and presented which already exists (even if out of sight); God will bring the deeds in on the Day of Judgment. But who would be preserving them all these days, if not God? This too shows that His power, authority and Kingdom are not confined to the Day of Judgment. He says: *and your Lord is the Preserver of all things* (34:21); *and with Us is a writing that preserve* (50:4).

Tajid (shall find) is derived from *al-wijdān* (to find); its opposite is to lose. "Of good" and "of evil": "of" describes the thing that will be presented. "Good" and "evil" have been used as common noun, to show its generality—he will find there every good however trivial and every evil however insignificant. It appears from the context that the second clause, "what it has done of evil" is in conjunction with the preceding one, "what it has done of good."

It is one of those verses which prove embodiment of deeds, as we have described in detail in a previous volume.[1]

… [it] shall wish that between it and that [evil] there were a long duration of time: The subject of this sentence is a deleted pronoun referring to the soul. *Law* (if) is a conjunctive, as a rule introducing hypothetical conditional clauses; *law* followed by *anna* (if) introduces nominal clauses; this combination has frequently been used in the Qur'an; therefore, no attention should be paid to the claim of a writer that this combination was not correct.

al-Amad denotes distance of time. al-Rāghib has said in his *al-Mufradāt al-Qur'an*:

> "*al-Amad* and *al-abad* have nearly the same meaning; but *al-abad* denotes the eternal duration, without an end; that is why it is never restricted by a limit, it cannot be said, to this or that *al-abad*. On the other hand, *al-amad* generally signifies a limited duration but with unknown limit; sometimes the limit is specified, for example, *amada kadhā* (such and such period), as they say this or that time. The difference between *al-amad* (span of time)

1 See Eng. vol. 1 under verses 2:26-27. (Ed.)

and *al-zamān* (time) is that *al-amad* looks at the terminus of time while *al-zamān* looks at the whole period from beginning to end. That is why some have said that *al-amad* and *al-madd* (space of time, distance) are nearly similar in meaning."

The wish of the evil-doer, that there should be between him and his deed a long duration of time, shows that the presence of that evil would cause him sorrow; it follows that the presence of good deed would make the good-doer happy.

He will only wish for a long duration of time between himself and his deed, and not for its complete disappearance. Why? He will see how God has preserved it from the day it was done to the Day of Judgment; he will realize that it was of no avail to wish that a thing under such Divine protection should disappear; therefore, he will only wish for the next "best" thing: Would that it had not appeared at the most awkward time, in that most difficult situation. He will wish the same for the evil companion: *And whoever turns himself away from the remembrance of the Beneficent Allah, We appoint for him a Satan, so he becomes his associate … Until when he comes to Us, he says: O would that between me and thee there were the distance of the East and the West, so evil is the associate!* (43:36-38).

… and Allah cautions you of Himself: The repeated warning emphasizes the threat beyond any doubt. Also, it may be that this warning refers to the punishment of the Day of Judgment (as that is the subject of this verse), while the first warning related to the result of that offence in this life or in both lives.

… and Allah is Compassionate to the servants: It reminds the servants of their relation to God—they are His servants and slaves, and He is their Compassionate Master. Nevertheless, this clause makes the preceding threat doubly emphatic. Such expressions are used for warning someone in the severest term. The import of such clause will be like this: Do not do such a thing, because I have firmly decided not to forgive such offence; I warn you before hand because I have compassion for you.

The meaning then will be as follows: God is Compassionate to the servants; that is why He has warned them before hand not to go near this evil; because if they did so, they would have to undergo the punishment; and they would find no intercessor or protector to intercede

on their behalf or to save them.

قُلْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُحِبُّونَ اللَّهَ فَاتَّبِعُونِي يُحْبِبْكُمُ اللَّهُ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿٣١﴾

(3:31) ***Say: If you love Allah, then follow me, Allah will love you and forgive you your sins; and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.***

When writing about the verse 2:165[1] (… *and those who believe are stronger in love of Allah* …), we had explained the meaning of love, and said that in reality it relates to God, and after that it may relate to others.

No doubt, God in His Book invites His servants to believe in Him, to worship Him with sincere devotion, and to steer clear of polytheism. He says: *Now, surely, sincere religion is for Allah [alone]* (39:3); *And they were not enjoined anything except that they should worship Allah, being sincere to Him in religion …* (97:5); *Therefore call upon Allah, being sincere to Him in religion, though averse be the unbelievers* (40:14). This theme is found in many other verses.

Sincerity in religion can truly be achieved only when man's heart is not attached to anything other than God—be it another deity or some desired object; be it a worldly ambition or even some other worldly goal like entering the garden or protection from the Fire. When the heart cuts all links with such things and attaches itself exclusively to God, then the man attains the sincerity of religion, and the love of God.

Love is the only link that connects a lover to his beloved; it attracts and pulls the lover to the beloved. The lover wants to make up through the beloved the defects and imperfections that he finds in his own life. The biggest news for him is that his beloved requites his love. At this stage, both love each other; both become lovers, both become beloved.

Man loves food, and gets it to make up the deficiency which shows itself in hunger; he loves the opposite sex, to satisfy a biological need; he loves his friend for genial companionship. A servant loves his master for his kind patronage. Look at the instances of love, read the stories of well-known lovers—you will find everywhere the truth of what we have mentioned.

When a sincere servant loves God, his only ambition is to attract

1 See Eng. vol. 2 (Ed.)

the love of God to himself; would that God should love him as he loves God; would that God should become his, as he has become of God. This is the reality of God's love.

Love, as mentioned above, is a link that joins one thing to the other. But God does not count every love as true love. True love demands that the lover—in this case, the believer—should love all that is related to God; he should devoutly accept all that comes from Him. On God depends everything in its existence and in all its affairs; everything seeks a medium to Him; and every big and small thing ultimately returns to Him. In this background, true love of God, sincerity in that love, can be achieved only through believing in the religion of monotheism, that it, Islam, and surely the religion with God is Islam. It is the religion which His representatives brought and which His apostles and prophets taught. It is especially true about the religion brought by Muḥammad; it teaches a sublime devotion, an unsurpassed sincerity; it is the natural religion which contains the last law, brought by a Lawgiver with whom the chain of the prophets came to its end. All these facts may easily be inferred from the Qur'an, if one ponders on it.

The Prophet introduced his path as the path of monotheism, the path of sincerity; as he was ordered by God to say: *Say: This is my way: I invite* (you) *to Allah; with clear sight* (are) *I and he who follows me; and glory be to Allah; and I am not of the polytheists* (12:108). Accordingly, his way was to invite people to God, with clear sight, with sincerity, without ascribing any partner to God. His way was the way of invitation to God and of sincerity about God. Anyone who wants to follow him, should proceed on the same highway.

Then God said that the way of invitation and sincerity can be found only in the shariah brought by Muḥammad: *Then We have made you follow a shariah in the affair, therefore follow it …* (45:18); also He said that it means total submission to Him: *But if they dispute with you, say: I have submitted myself [entirely] to Allah and [so has] everyone who follows me…* (3:20); then He attributed this way to Himself and declared that it was His straight path: *And [know] that this is My path, the straight one, therefore follow it* (6:153). If we read all these verses together, it will be clear that Islam (that is, the shariah brought by the Prophet, containing fundamental beliefs, moral teachings, practical laws, and having his own sacred life as its model) is the path of sincerity, that is

based on love. It is the religion of sincerity, the religion of love.

The above discourse makes clear the meaning of the verse under discussion: *Say: If you love Allah, then follow me, Allah will love you*. It gives the following import—and God knows better: If you want to be sincere to God in your servitude, truly basing it on His love, then follow this shariah; it is based on love, and is the embodiment of sincerity and submission; it is the straight path of God, whoever proceeds on it is sure to reach nearer to God. If you follow me in this path, then God will love you; reaching this stage you will get what you want. Your love will be requited.

This is the general import of the verse if looked in isolation. But the context gives it some particular implications too. It comes soon after the verses forbidding the believers to befriend the unbelievers. Friendship is love between the friends. Therefore, the verse exhorts the believers to follow the Prophet if they are sincere in the claim that they love God and belong to His party. Love of God cannot be reconciled with following the unbelievers in their vain desires and unhealthy views; remember that friendship certainly makes a friend follow the other friend in thoughts and deeds. One who loves God should not run after the worldly trinkets found with the unbelievers, and should not set his eyes on their worldly honor and wealth. If you love God you should follow His Prophet in his religion, as He declares: *Then We have made you follow a shariah in the affair, therefore follow it, and do not follow the low desires of those who do not know. Surely they shall not avail you in the least against Allah; and surely the unjust are friends of each other, and Allah is the guardian of those who guard [against evil]* (45:18-19). It should be noted how smoothly the verse goes from the theme of "following" to that of "friendship," showing that both are, in fact, one and the same.

In short, anyone claiming to love God, to belong to God, must follow the Prophet, in order that it may take him to the stage where God requites his love and loves him.

The verse mentions only the love of God, and not His guardianship because guardianship is founded on love. Also, it mentions only God's love, because the love of the Prophet and the believers is in reality a part of God's love; it has no independent existence.

… and forgive you your sins; and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful:

God's mercy is all-encompassing; His grace is without limit, and His munificence without restriction; it is not confined to any individual or group. The river of His mercy is flowing; everybody is free to take from it as much as he can. Whatever restriction there is, it is not in the river, it is in the receptacle one brings with him. The servants' ability, or disability, imposes its own limitations; God has not put any limit to His mercy: *and the bounty of your. Lord is not confined* (17:20).

Sin is the impediment, holding one back from reaching nearer to God, from partaking of the bounties resulting from it, like the paradise etc. If the rust of sin is removed from a man's heart, the door of Divine bliss will automatically open for him, and he will join the chosen people in the abode of Divine honor and eternal happiness. That is why God added forgiveness of sins to the good news of His love. As described earlier; love attracts the lover to the beloved. When the servant loves God, it moves him to come nearer with sincere monotheism and unalloyed devotion and worship. When God loves a servant, He comes nearer to him and removes the curtains which hide the sublime reality. As mentioned above, there is no curtain except sin, and removing it means forgiving the sins. Once that hindrance is removed, there is no obstacle in the way; and Divine munificence will take over from there; and he can partake of the ever-lasting honor and never ending bounties as much as he likes.

To understand this reality even more clearly, ponder on the verse, *Nay! rather, what they used to do has become like rust upon their hearts. Nay! most surely they shall on that day be debarred from their Lord* (83:14-15), in conjunction with the verse, *Allah will love you and forgive you your sins.*

قُلْ أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَالرَّسُولَ ۖ فَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْكَافِرِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

(3:32) ***Say: Obey Allah and the Messenger; but if they turn back, then surely Allah does not love the unbelievers.***

The preceding verse invited the servants to "follow" the Messenger. To follow means to process behind in someone's track. The believer follows the Messenger in the way taken by the Messenger. The way the Messenger has taken is the straight path which belongs to God. It is the shariah ordained for the Messenger and conveyed through him to the mankind; and the servants are to obey the Messenger and adhere to his shariah. That is why

the order to follow the Messenger was changed to his obedience. The Messenger's path of sincerity is the sum total of his shariah—his orders and prohibitions, his mission and his guidance. When one follows the Messenger in his tracks, He in fact obeys God and the Messenger in the shariah. God's name has been added with the Messenger's, to show that the obedience of God is one and the same with the obedience of the Messenger. The Messenger's name was necessary to mention with that of God because the talk is about following his tracks.

Someone has written that the sentence means: Obey God in His Book and obey the Messenger in his sunnah. But what we have written above clearly shows the unsoundness of this explanation. It is obvious that the words, "Obey God and the Messenger," have been revealed as explanation of the preceding words, "If you love God, then follow me …" Further, this verse shows that the obedience of God and obedience of the Messenger are one; that is why the word "obey," has not been repeated. Had there been two different things to be followed (the Book, for God; the sunnah for the Messenger), it would have been appropriate to say, 'Obey God and obey the Messenger,' as has been said in another verse: *O you who believe! Obey Allah and obey the Messenger and the masters of the affair from among you …* (4:59). Anyhow, the verse has the same general and particular aspects as the previous one.

… but if they turn back, then surely Allah does not love the unbelievers: The ending clause shows that those who disregard this order are unbelievers; the same is the import of other verses obliging the believers not to take the unbelievers as friends.

This clause too shows this verse to be an explanation of the previous one. That verse described that God loves those believers who accept and obey the order to follow the Messenger. This one says that God does not love those "unbelievers" who neglect this order to obey the Messenger.

These verses make the following things clear:

First: *Taqiyyah* (dissimulation) is allowed in certain circumstances.

Second: The punishment for befriending the unbelievers will not be waived; the sin of disobeying this order will not be forgiven; it is a firmly decreed order.

Third: The Divinely ordained shariah exemplifies the sincerity towards God; and that sincerity exemplifies the love of God. In other words, if we analyze the religion—the sum total of Divine knowledge and faith, the

ethical teachings and practical laws, with all their details—it will resolve into sincerity (a sincere servant of God believes that his person, his character and his actions, all belong to God); and on further analysis this sincerity resolves into the love of God.

If we reverse the process and start from the other end, then the love of God constitutes the main ingredient of the sincerity, and the sincerity leads to the shariah.

Looking from another angle, religion resolves into submission, and submission into monotheism.

Fourth: It is disbelief to take the unbelievers for friends. It is a disbelief related to the branches of religion, not to its roots. Other examples are the disbelief of the one who does not pay *zakāt,* and of the one who does not pray.

It may possibly be explained in another way. The one who befriends an unbeliever, has himself been called unbeliever, because that is the ultimate destination where such a friendship leads to. We have described this theme earlier, and shall further explain it in Chapter 5 (The Table).

Examining Narrations

(1) It is written in *al-Durr al-manthūr,* about the words of God: *Let not the believers take the unbelievers for friends …:* "Ibn Isḥāq, Ibn Jarīr and Ibn Abī Hātim have narrated from Ibn ᶜAbbās that he said: al-Ḥajjāj b. ᶜAmr was an ally of Kaᶜb b. al-Ashraf and Ibn Abi al-Ḥaqīq and Qays b. Zayd; and they were secretly meeting with some Helpers with a view to seduce them from their religion. (Seeing this) Rifāᶜah b. al-Mundhir, ᶜAbdullāh b. Jubayr and Saᶜd b. Khuthaymah told those Helpers to keep away from those Jews and to be wary of their secret talks, "lest they lead you away from your religion." But they refused (to listen). Then God revealed: *Let not the believers take the unbelievers for friends … and Allah has power over all thing."*

Author's comment: Apparently this tradition has applied the verse to that story. Otherwise, the Qur'an uses the word "unbelievers," for a wider circle than the People of the Book. If any verse were revealed about that story, it would have been the one forbidding friendship with the Jews and the Christians, not these verses.

(2) The *tafsīr al-Ṣāfī* quotes under the words: *except [when] you guard*

yourselves against [them] …, from *al-Iḥtijāj,* that the Commander of the faithful said, *inter alia,* in a tradition: "and He ordered you to practise *taqiyyah* in your religion; because God says: Be careful, and be careful again, not to expose yourself to perdition, and not to neglect *taqiyyah* which I have ordered you (to practise); otherwise, you will cause shedding of your blood and the blood of your brethren (as well); will expose your bounties as well as theirs to ruin; and will cause their humiliation at the hands of the enemies of the religion of God, while God has ordered you to exalt them."

(3) al-Ṣādiq said: "The Messenger of God used to say: 'He has no religion who does not have *taqiyyah;'* then he used to say: 'God says: *except [when] you guard yourselves against them for fear from them.*' " (al-ʿAyyāshī)

(4) al-Bāqir said: "*Taqiyyah* is (allowed) in every matter about which a man falls in predicament; and God has made it lawful to him." (*al-Kāfī*)

Author's comment: There are very many traditions from the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt—probably reaching the limit of *mutawātir*—containing the permission of *taqiyyah;* and you have already seen how the Qur'anic verses incontestably prove it.

(5) Saʿīd b. Yāsar said: "Abū ʿAbdillāh told me: 'Is religion anything other than love? Verily God, the Mighty, the Great, says: *Say: If you love Allah, then follow me, Allah will love you.*' " (*Maʿānī al-akhbār*)

Author's comment: This tradition has been narrated in *al-Kāfī* from al-Bāqir; also al-Qummī and al-ʿAyyāshī have narrated it in their *tafsīrs* from the same Imam through al-Hadhdhāʾ; again al-ʿAyyāshī has narrated it in his *al-Tafsīr* from the same Imam through Burayd and from al-Ṣādiq through Ribʿī.

These traditions support our explanation given in the Commentary.

(6) al-Ṣādiq said: "He who disobeys God, does not love Him." Then he quoted (the following poem):

You disobey Allah and (at the same time) *you manifest His love;*
By my life! this is a strange behavior.
If your love were true, you would have obeyed Him; Verily, the lover obeys his beloved. (*Maʿānī al-akhbār*)

(7) al-Ṣādiq said, *inter alia,* in a tradition: "And whoever likes to know that God loves him, his action should be in obedience to God and he should follow us. Has he not heard the talk of God, the Mighty, the Great, with His Prophet: *Say: If you love Allah, then follow me, Allah will love you and forgive you your sins …"* (*al-Kāfī*)

Author's comment: We shall explain how the Imams' obedience is one and the same with the obedience of the Prophet when writing about the verse: *O you who believe! obey Allah and obey the Messenger and the masters of the affairs from among you …* (4:59)

(8) ʿAbd b. Ḥamīd has narrated from al-Ḥasan that he said: "The Messenger of God said: 'Whoever feels an aversion to my sunnah, he is not from me.' Then he recited this verse: *Say: If you love Allah, then follow me, Allah will love you …"* (*al-Durr al-manthūr*)

(9) It has been narrated by Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Abū Naʿīm (in his *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ*) and al-Hākim, from ʿĀʾishah that she said: "The Messenger of God said: 'Polytheism is more undetectable than the crawling of an ant on a (smooth) rock in a dark night; and its least (grade) is that one should love something because of (its) injustice and should hate something because of (its) justice; and what is religion except loving and hating in the cause of God? God has said: *Say: If you love Allah, then follow me, Allah will love you …'* " (*ibid.*)

(10) Aḥmad, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī, Ibn Mājah, Ibn Ḥabbān and al-Ḥākim have narrated through Abū Rāfiʿ from the Prophet that he said: "I should not find one of you, reclining on his couch, saying—when there comes to him one of my commands, in which I have ordered or prohibited something—'We do not understand (it); we shall follow (only) what we find in the Book of God.' " (*ibid.*)

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Verses 33-34

إِنَّ اللَّهَ اصْطَفَىٰ آدَمَ وَنُوحًا وَآلَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَآلَ عِمْرَانَ عَلَى الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٣٣﴾ ذُرِّيَّةً بَعْضُهَا مِنْ بَعْضٍ ۗ وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٣٤﴾

(3:33) *Surely Allah chose Adam and Noah and the descendants of Abraham and the descendants of ʿĪmrān above all the worlds,*

(3:34) *Offspring, one from the other; and Allah is Hearing, Knowing.*

Introduction & Commentary

Now begins the story of Jesus, son of Mary, with all the related topics, sifting the truth from the falsehoods that cover his life and personality; the chapter further offers clear arguments against the People of the Book. The two verses serve as the joining link between the coming discourse about Jesus and the preceding verses regarding the People of the Book.

إِنَّ اللَّهَ اصْطَفَىٰ آدَمَ وَنُوحًا وَآلَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَآلَ عِمْرَانَ عَلَى الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٣٣﴾

(3:33) *Surely Allah chose Adam and Noah and the descendants of Abraham and the descendants of ʿĪmrān above all the worlds,*

It was explained under the verse 2:130 (*and most certainly We chose him in this world*)[1] that *al-iṣṭifāʾ* means to take the choicest part of a thing; to purify a thing from all impurities. It may be translated, for all practical purposes, as selection or choosing. Comparing it with various stages of *al-wilāyah* (friendship of God[2]), we find that it fits perfectly the stage of "Islam," that is, total surrender of the servant to the will of his Lord, being truly happy with what the Lord decrees for him.

But that "selection" is not what this verse implies. It does not say, God chose them from among the worlds. It says, He chose them "above

1 See Eng. vol 2 (Ed.)

2 This is one of the meanings of *al-wilāyah*. However, in this context it means guardianship of God or rather, managing the affairs of the believers. (Ed.)

all the worlds." "From among the worlds" would have implied that only they were the Muslims; that the total surrender to the will of God was exclusively reserved for them. Obviously, such a connotation would be wrong. The clause used in the verse, "above all the worlds," has given a new connotation to the selection, and shows that they were chosen and given excellence and precedence over other people in some things exclusively given to them. To appreciate the difference between the two selections, look at the verse 3:42 which says: *And when the angels said: O Mary! surely Allah has chosen you and purified you and chosen you above the women of the worlds,* Clearly the first choosing is related to her own virtues without looking at anyone else, and the second implies a sense of comparison, exalting her over all other women.

First of the chosen ones was Adam. He was the first human vicegerent of God appointed for this earth, as God says: *And when your Lord said to the angels, Verily I am going to make in the earth a vicegerent …* (2:30); was the first to open the door of repentance and Divine forgiveness, as God says: *Then his Lord chose him, so He turned to him* (that is, with forgiveness) *and guided him* (20:122); and was the first of those for whom God ordained the religion, as He says: *So if there comes to you guidance from Me, then whoever follows My guidance, he shall not go astray nor be unhappy* (20:123). These virtues exclusively belong to him, and enough are they for one's excellence!

Then the verse mentions Noah. He was the first of the five *ūlū al-ʿazm* messengers who were given a Divine Book and a new shariah, as we explained under the verse: *Mankind was but one people, so Allah sent the prophets …* (2:213)[1]. Also, he was the second father of the human race; and God sent peace on him in the worlds, saying: *And We made his offspring the survivors. And We perpetuated to him* (praise) *among the later generations. Peace be on Noah in all the worlds* (37:77-79).

Then God mentions the descendants of Abraham and the descendants of ʿImrān among the chosen ones. *al-Āl* of a man is someone closely related to him. al-Rāghib says:

> *al-Āl:* It is said that it is an altered form of *al-ahl;* yet its diminutive, *al-uhayl* has got the *"h"* restored; but it has the peculiarity that, unlike *al-ahl,* it is always annexed (in genitive construction)

1 See Eng. vol. 3 (Ed.)

> to the proper names of rational beings, and not to common nouns, places or eras. It is said: *Āl* of Zayd; but not *āl* of man, nor *āl* of this place or that period. Also they do not, for example, say, *āl* of the tailor; rather it is always annexed to a great and noble personality, for example, *āl* of the Sultan, *āl* of God. As for *al-ahl,* it is annexed to all types of words; for example, they say, *ahl* of God, *ahl of* the tailor; likewise they say, *ahl* of this era, *ahl* of that town and so on. (On the other hand) some people say that *al-āl* actually means the name of a person; and that its diminutive is *uwayl*; and it is used for someone who is very closely and personally related to a person, either by close kinship or by love and attachment."

Accordingly, *āl* of *Ibrāhīm* (Abraham) and *āl* of *ʿImrān* mean their closely related family members and those who were exclusively attached to them. (That is why we have translated the word as 'descendants'.)

Obviously, *āl* of *Ibrāhīm* should refer to all the purified ones among his descendants, for example, Isaac, Israel and other prophets from the house of Israel as well as Ishmael and his purified descendants, chief of whom was Muḥammad (may God bless him and his progeny); and those who followed them to various stages of the friendship of God. But the verse then mentions *āl* of *ʿImrān*, and it shows that *āl* of *Ibrāhīm* does not have such a wide connotation. The said ʿImrān is either the father of Mary or the father of Moses, and in any case he was himself a descendant of Abraham and so were his descendants; by mentioning them separately, it has been made clear that the phrase *āl Ibrāhīm* (the descendants of Abraham) refers to some, and not all, of his purified descendants.

God has said in another place in the Qur'an: *Or do they envy the people for what Allah has given them of His grace? So indeed We have given to Abraham's children [descendants] the Book and the wisdom, and We have given them a grand kingdom* (4:54). The context shows that this verse describes and condemns the envy of the Israelites which they felt against Muḥammad. Other verses too support this interpretation. And it makes it clear that the phrase, "descendants of Abraham," does not include here the Israelites; in other words it has been used for Abraham's descendants other than Isaac, Jacob and the progeny of Jacob (who are generally called the Israelites). After excluding that

branch, the only descendants to whom this phrase is applicable are Ishmael and his purified descendants, including the Prophet and his progeny.[1]

Some other verses also support this connotation. For example: *Most surely the nearest of people to Abraham are those who followed him and this Prophet and those who believe; and Allah is the guardian of the believers* (3:68). *And when Abraham and Ishmael were raising the foundations of the House: Our Lord! accept from us; surely Thou art the Hearing, the Knowing; Our Lord! and make us both submissive to Thee and [raise] from our offspring a group submitting to Thee, and show us our ways of devotion and turn to us [mercifully], surely Thou art the Oft returning [with mercy], the Merciful. Our Lord! and raise up in them an Messenger from among themselves who shall recite to them Thy communications and teach them the Book and the wisdom, and purify them; surely Thou art the Mighty, the Wise* (2:127-129).

The phrase, the descendants of Abraham, therefore, refers to his offspring from the branch of Ishmael.

It should be pointed out here that the verse in no way implies any exclusiveness; it simply says that certain named prophets and families were chosen and given excellence over the nations; it does not say that others were not chosen or exalted. It follows that:

There is no discrepancy between this verse (which is silent about the excellence of Abraham himself, and of Moses and other Israelite prophets) and numerous other verses which eulogize their virtues and excellence. (The Qur'an, contains very many such verses and there is no need to quote them here.) However, as we said, to affirm one thing does not mean to negate or reject the others.

Likewise, there is no conflict between this verse and those which bestow similar excellence to the Children of Israel; for example: *And certainly We gave the Book and the wisdom and the prophecy to the Children of Israel, and We gave them of the goodly things, and We made them excel the nations* (45:16).

The fact that two prophets and two families were exalted and given excellence over the nations, does not mean that others could

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1 God willing, we shall later prove that the word, "the people," used in the verse 4:54, refers to the Prophet, and that undoubtedly he is one of the "descendants of Abraham" mentioned therein. (Auth.)

not similarly be given excellence over the nations; nor that some others could not be exalted and given excellence over those already exalted. Giving excellence to one or various groups and nations only implies that they were given precedence, in some worldly or other worldly virtue, over those below them. It does not say anything on whether some others could be given excellence over them or whether some others too could be exalted over the worlds.

They were chosen over all the worlds. This is not in conflict with the concept that some among them were made to excel the others. We know that God chose the prophets over all other people, but at the same time He gave some of them more prestige than the others. He says: *and every one* (that is, of the prophets) *We made to excel the world* (6:87). And again He says: *and certainly We have made some of the prophets to excel others …* (17:55).

Now we come to the "descendants of ʿImrān": Apparently the name, ʿImrān, refers to the father of Mary. These two verses are immediately followed by the stories of the wife of ʿImrān and their daughter, Mary; moreover, ʿImrān, father of Mary, has been repeatedly mentioned by his name in the Qur'an, while ʿImrān, father of Moses, has not been mentioned even once in a way as to make it clear that it was he who was intended. All this supports the view that here too ʿImrān refers to the father of Mary; and *āl ʿImrān* (translated here as descendants of ʿImrān) refers to Mary and Jesus (peace be on both of them), alone or together with the wife of ʿImrān.

Reportedly the Christians do not agree that Mary's father was called ʿImrān: but the Qur'an is not bound to cater to their views.

ذُرِّيَّةً بَعْضُهَا مِنْ بَعْضٍ ۗ وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ

(3:34) *Offspring* (dhurriyyah), *one from the other; and Allah is Hearing, Knowing.*

It is said that *al-dhurriyyah* originally meant small children: later the meaning was extended to cover all the offspring. It is the latter meaning that is implied in this verse. The word is in the accusative because it has the force of an explanatory conjunction.

The clause, "one from the other," shows that if you look at any one of the group, it begins from, and returns to, the others. In other words, the whole is made of similar parts, one part does not differ from the

other in its attributes and qualifications. The clause, in the framework of its theme and context, implies that these descendants do not differ from one another in the attributes of excellence, and that it is for this reason that God made them to excel over the worlds; actions of God are not done haphazardly or at random—surely such a selection cannot be done recklessly, because it is the spring-head of such good thing in this world.

… and Allah is Hearing, Knowing: God hears their speech which shows their inner thoughts; He knows what is in their minds and hearts. This concluding sentence gives the reason why they were chosen. And the preceding clause, "Offspring, one from the other," explains why the whole group was considered worthy of this Divine selection. The verse implies the following connotation: God made them to excel the worlds; that excellence and selection covered them all, because they were a group, each of them being similar to the others, in their spiritual sublimity, surrender of hearts and established truth of the words; God, bestowed this excellence on them because He is the Hearing and Knowing, He hears what they say, and knows what is in their minds.

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Examining Narrations

(1) al-Riḍā had a talk with al-Maʾmūn; during which al-Maʾmūn said: "Has God given the offspring (of the Prophet) excellence over all other people?" Abu al-Ḥasan (al-Riḍā) said: "Indeed God has clearly described, in His decisive Book, the excellence of the (said) offspring over all the people." al-Maʾmūn asked: "Where is it in the Book of God?" al-Riḍā said: "In His words: *Surely Allah chose Adam and Noah the descendants of Abraham and the descendants of ʿImrān above all the worlds; offspring, one from the other …*" (*ʿUyūn al-akhbār*)

(2) Aḥmad b. Muḥammad narrates from al-Riḍā (who narrates) from Abū Jaʿfar that he said: "Liar is he who thinks that He (God) is finished with the (management of the) affairs, because the pleasure is of God regarding His creation; He wills what He pleases and does what He pleases. God has said: *offspring, one from the other, and Allah is the Hearing, the Knowing.* Its (that is, the offspring's) last is from its first, and its first is from its last. Therefore, if you were told that a certain thing would happen in respect of

a particular offspring, and it happened about another (person) from the same (offspring), then the thing happened exactly as you were told." (al-ʿAyyāshī)

Author's comment: This tradition proves the explanation written earlier, of the verse, *offspring, one from the other*.

(3) al-Bāqir recited this verse and said: "We are from them, and we are the remnant of that *al-ʿitrah* (family)." (*ibid.*)

Author's comment: *al-ʿitrah* actually means the foundation, the root, the basis which a thing relies upon. That is why it is used for the children and near relatives of preceding generations. In other words, it refers to the vertical genealogy of a person.

It is because of this semantic value of the word that the Imam has taken the clause (*offspring, one from the other*) to refer to a vertical genealogical line beginning with Adam, and passing through Noah to the *āl* of *Ibrāhīm* and *āl* of *ʿImrān*.

It also explains why God has mentioned Adam and Noah with the two families; it was done to establish an unbroken chain of selection right from the beginning of the human race to Muḥammad and his purified and sinless progeny.

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Verses 35-41

إِذْ قَالَتِ امْرَأَتُ عِمْرَانَ رَبِّ إِنِّي نَذَرْتُ لَكَ مَا فِي بَطْنِي مُحَرَّرًا فَتَقَبَّلْ مِنِّي ۖ إِنَّكَ
أَنْتَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٣٥﴾ فَلَمَّا وَضَعَتْهَا قَالَتْ رَبِّ إِنِّي وَضَعْتُهَا أُنْثَىٰ وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ
بِمَا وَضَعَتْ وَلَيْسَ الذَّكَرُ كَالْأُنْثَىٰ ۖ وَإِنِّي سَمَّيْتُهَا مَرْيَمَ وَإِنِّي أُعِيذُهَا بِكَ وَذُرِّيَّتَهَا
مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ ﴿٣٦﴾ فَتَقَبَّلَهَا رَبُّهَا بِقَبُولٍ حَسَنٍ وَأَنْبَتَهَا نَبَاتًا حَسَنًا وَكَفَّلَهَا
زَكَرِيَّا ۖ كُلَّمَا دَخَلَ عَلَيْهَا زَكَرِيَّا الْمِحْرَابَ وَجَدَ عِنْدَهَا رِزْقًا ۖ قَالَ يَا مَرْيَمُ أَنَّىٰ لَكِ
هَٰذَا ۖ قَالَتْ هُوَ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ ۖ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَرْزُقُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ ﴿٣٧﴾ هُنَالِكَ
دَعَا زَكَرِيَّا رَبَّهُ ۖ قَالَ رَبِّ هَبْ لِي مِنْ لَدُنْكَ ذُرِّيَّةً طَيِّبَةً ۖ إِنَّكَ سَمِيعُ الدُّعَاءِ ﴿٣٨﴾
فَنَادَتْهُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ وَهُوَ قَائِمٌ يُصَلِّي فِي الْمِحْرَابِ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يُبَشِّرُكَ بِيَحْيَىٰ مُصَدِّقًا
بِكَلِمَةٍ مِنَ اللَّهِ وَسَيِّدًا وَحَصُورًا وَنَبِيًّا مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿٣٩﴾ قَالَ رَبِّ أَنَّىٰ يَكُونُ
لِي غُلَامٌ وَقَدْ بَلَغَنِيَ الْكِبَرُ وَامْرَأَتِي عَاقِرٌ ۖ قَالَ كَذَٰلِكَ اللَّهُ يَفْعَلُ مَا يَشَاءُ ﴿٤٠﴾ قَالَ
رَبِّ اجْعَلْ لِي آيَةً ۖ قَالَ آيَتُكَ أَلَّا تُكَلِّمَ النَّاسَ ثَلَاثَةَ أَيَّامٍ إِلَّا رَمْزًا ۗ وَاذْكُرْ رَبَّكَ
كَثِيرًا وَسَبِّحْ بِالْعَشِيِّ وَالْإِبْكَارِ ﴿٤١﴾

(3:35) *When the woman of ʿImrān said: My Lord! surely I vow to Thee what is in my womb, to be devoted [to Thy service]; accept therefore from me; surely Thou art the Hearing, the Knowing.*

(3:36) *So when she brought her forth, she said: My Lord! surely I have brought it forth a female—and Allah knew best what she brought forth, and the male is not like the female—and I have named her Mary, and I commend her and her offspring into Thy protection from the accursed Satan.*

(3:37) *So her Lord accepted her with a good acceptance and made her grow up a good growing, and gave her into the charge of Zachariah; whenever Zachariah entered the sanctuary to [see]*

her, he found with her food. He said: O Mary! whence comes this to you? She said: It is from Allah. Surely Allah gives sustenance to whom He pleases, without measure.

(3:38) *There did Zachariah pray to his Lord; he said: My Lord! grant me from Thee good offspring; surely Thou art the Hearer of prayer.*

(3:39) *Then the angels called to him as he stood praying in the sanctuary: That Allah gives you the good news of John verifying a word from Allah, and honorable and chaste and a prophet, from among the good ones.*

(3:40) *He said: My Lord! How shall there be a son [born] to me, and old age has already come upon me, and my wife is barren? He said: Even thus does Allah what He pleases.*

(3:41) *He said: My Lord! appoint a sign for me. Said He: Your sign is that you would not speak to men for three days except by signs; and remember your Lord much and glorify Him in the evening and the morning.*

Commentary

إِذْ قَالَتِ امْرَأَتُ عِمْرَانَ رَبِّ إِنِّي نَذَرْتُ لَكَ مَا فِي بَطْنِي مُحَرَّرًا فَتَقَبَّلْ مِنِّي ۖ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٣٥﴾

(3:35) ***When the woman of ʿImrān said: My Lord! surely I vow to Thee what is in my womb, to be devoted*** **(muḥarraran)** ***[to Thy service]: accept therefore from me; surely Thou art the Hearing, the Knowing.***

When a man makes a vow (*al-nadhr*), he in effect binds himself to do something which hitherto was not compulsory for him. *al-Taḥrīr* is to release from a bond; that is why emancipation of slave is called *al-taḥrīr*; the same word is used for writing, probably because writing releases the ideas from the repository of mind and memory. *al-Taqabbul* is to accept willingly and gladly, for example, accepting a gift, accepting a prayer and so on.

The words, *When the woman of ʿImrān said: My Lord ! surely I vow to Thee what is in my womb, to be devoted [to Thy service]*, clearly show that she made this vow during her pregnancy, and that she was pregnant from ʿImrān. It also implies that ʿImrān was not alive at that time; otherwise, she could not make the vow so independently to release her

child for Divine worship. The same idea is implied in the verse: … *and you were not with them when they cast their pens [to decide] which of them should have Mary in his charge* … (3:44).

Obviously, when the parents release the child, it does not mean that they emancipate it from any slavery. What the said release amounts to is that the child is freed from the bonds of parental guardianship; the parents undertake not to train or use the child for their own benefit, nor to demand from it their various rights like obedience and so on. Such a release liberates the child from the authority of the parents. If the child has been released for the service of God, it is taken under Divine protection and guardianship, and devotes its time to the service of God, that is, serving in synagogues, churches and other places reserved for Divine worship. This would continue up to the period the child would otherwise have remained under parental guardianship. Reportedly they used to release the child for the service of God; the parents did not use the child in their work, or for their benefit. He was put in the synagogue, to clean it and serve in it. This continued till he reached the age of puberty; then he was free to remain therein or to go away; if he decided to continue, he stayed therein; and if he liked to go away, he did so.

The verse shows that she firmly believed the child in her womb to be a male, not a female. It is remarkable how confidently she made the vow with her Lord, in full certainty, without attaching any proviso; she said: *My Lord! surely I vow to Thee what is in my womb, to be devoted [to Thy service]*, without saying, for example, "if he is a male child." And she used the masculine form *muḥarraran* (released; translated here as, devoted) referring to what was in her womb. Of course, according to its syntactical position it may be construed as showing the state of the relative pronoun *mā* (what [is in my womb]), which may be used for either gender. But undoubtedly her choice of word was based on her belief that she carried a male child in her womb. Otherwise, if she had taken a vow to release whatever was in her womb, be it a boy or a girl, she would not have shown such a disappointment when she delivered a girl: *My Lord! surely I have brought it forth a female*; nor was there any reason for the Divine comment, *and the male is not like the female*.

One thing more. God quotes (without any adverse comment) her words showing her firm belief. It implies that her conviction was not

without a reason; nor was it based on her keen observations which give some such indications to experienced women. After all, such things are mere conjectures; *and surely conjecture does not avail against the truth at all.* And it is a habit of the Qur'an that whenever it quotes a false idea, it invariably always points to its falsehood. God says: *Allah knows what every female bears, and that of which the wombs fall short of completion and that in which they increase* (13:8); *Surely Allah is He with Whom is the knowledge of the hour, and He sends down the rain and He knows what is in the wombs* (31:34). The verses clearly say that the knowledge of "what is in the wombs" is one of the unseen, exclusively reserved for God. And God says: *The Knower of the unseen! so He does not reveal His secrets to any, except to him whom He chooses of an apostle* (72:26-27). It means that others may know the unseen only through Divine revelation. In this background, when God quotes her as saying something confidently about a subject exclusively reserved for God, it means that her belief, (that she was pregnant with a male child) was somehow based on a Divine revelation. That is why she did not lose hope of a male child even when she found her own child a female; instead, she again said with full conviction and certainty: *and I commend her and her offspring into Thy protection from the accursed Satan*. Look at her belief that Mary would have an offspring—obviously such a commendation was beyond her knowledge, if not based on revelation.

… accept therefore from me: She did not mention the object of the verb "accept." Possibly it could be the afore-mentioned vow, as it was a good deed; but more probably, she was beseeching God to accept her released child. The wording of the next verse [3:37], *So her Lord accepted her with a good acceptance*, clearly supports the latter meaning.

فَلَمَّا وَضَعَتْهَا قَالَتْ رَبِّ إِنِّي وَضَعْتُهَا أُنْثَىٰ وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا وَضَعَتْ وَلَيْسَ الذَّكَرُ كَالْأُنْثَىٰ ۖ وَإِنِّي سَمَّيْتُهَا مَرْيَمَ وَإِنِّي أُعِيذُهَا بِكَ وَذُرِّيَّتَهَا مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ ﴿٣٦﴾

(3:36) ***So when she brought her forth, she said: My Lord! surely I have brought it forth a female—and Allah knew best what she brought forth, and the male is not like the female—and I have named her Mary, and I commend her and her offspring into Thy protection from the accursed Satan.***

By putting a feminine pronoun in *brought her forth*, the Qur'an did away with the necessity of a longer description. What this concise sentence actually stands for is this: When she brought forth that which was in her womb and came to know that it was a female, she said: *My Lord! I have brought it forth a female*. This last sentence, although an informative, was in fact an exclamation to show her disappointment.

… and Allah knew best what she brought forth, and the male is not like the female: These are parenthetic sentences, and the speaker of both is God, not the woman of ʿImrān; even the second sentence is not spoken by her.

There is no doubt that the first sentence is a saying of God, commenting on her sorrowful cry. The words, *and Allah knew best what she brought forth*, in effect convey the following idea: God knew that she had delivered a female child; but He intended to fulfil through this daughter of hers all her hopes and expectations, in a far better way. Had the wife of ʿImrān know what God's plans were in making her child a female, she would not have shown any sorrow and disappointment. As the later events showed, the male child she hoped for could not accomplish what God intended this female child to achieve. Suppose, she were given a son, instead of the daughter she got; what could that son achieve? He, like Jesus, could be made a prophet; he could give eyes to the blind and heal the lepers; he could raise a few men from the dead. And this was the utmost he could do. But this female child, which God has given to the wife of ʿImrān, will be a means to complete the word of God; she will bring forth a son without a father; God will make her and her son together a sign for the people; that son will talk with people in his cradle; he will be a spirit and a word of God; his likeness before God will be like Adam; and there will be many manifest signs in giving this daughter, Mary, to the wife of ʿImrān and giving to Mary a son, Jesus, rather than giving a son directly to ʿImrān's wife.

Now it should be clear that the words, *and the male is not like the female*, are spoken by God. Had they been uttered by the wife of ʿImrān, she would have said, "and the female is not like the male." She would not have reversed the syntactic arrangement as the Qur'anic sentence has done. If a man hopes to get a very good thing or to be awarded a very high status, and then he gets an inferior thing or a lower rank, he regretfully says; The thing I got is not what I expected and hoped for.

He would never say: The thing I hoped for is not like that which I got.

In view of the above explanation, the definite articles in "the male" and "the female," (or at least in "the female") refer to the particular son and daughter spoken about; and the meaning would be as follows: The male she hoped for is not like the female she was given.

Many exegetes have taken the sentence, *and the male is not like the female*, to be a part of the speech of the woman of ʿImrān. Then they were faced with the difficulty of explaining its apparently reversed syntactic arrangement. They have tried without success to bring about some worthwhile explanation. Any interested reader should consult their books.

… and I have named her Mary, and I commend her and her offspring into Thy protection from the accursed Satan: It is said that Mary in their language means the worshipper and the servant.[1] In that case, it is easy to see why she hastened to name the child soon after delivery and mentioned the name to God.

Apparently, when she found out that the child was not a male (who could easily be released for worship of God and service of the synagogue), she hastened to give the child the name, Mary—thus dedicating her for the said worship and service. The words, *and I have named her Mary*, implied that she had dedicated that female child to the worship of God and released her for the synagogue's service. The words were in effect a sort of renewed vow, and that is why God accepted her offering in these words: *So her Lord accepted her with a good acceptance and made her grow up a good growing* (3:37).

Thereafter, she commended Mary and her offspring to the protection of God from the accursed Satan, in order that she might dedicate herself for Divine worship and remain devoted to the service of the synagogue, in a way that the name might truly represent the named.

She confidently talks with God about the offspring of Mary, without any condition or proviso. Such words cannot be spoken in presence of God by someone who knows nothing of the future. What the future

1 In Arabic, Mary is Miryām in Hebrew. According to the Westminster Dictionary of the Bible (by John D. Davis, revised and rewritten by Henry Snyder Gehman; ed. 1944) the root-word of Miryām signifies "obstinacy, rebellion," that is, opposite of the "reported meaning" of worship and service. (Trans.)

holds for a man is a part of the unseen and its knowledge is reserved for God. However, she talks here in the same assured way as she did when she made the vow first: "My Lord! surely I vow to Thee what is in my womb, to be devoted …" This confidence shows that she had the knowledge that she would get from ʿImrān a son of good faith and deed; when she became pregnant and ʿImrān died, she became absolutely sure that what she carried in her womb was the same promised son; when she delivered a daughter and became aware of her mistaken guess, she at once understood that the promise would be fulfilled through that daughter, that she would get that son from the offspring of that daughter. As soon as she realized this fact, she transferred her vow from the son she hoped for to the daughter she was given, named it Mary (that is, one who worships and serves), and entrusted her and her offspring to the protection of God against the accursed Satan.

All these aspects of the story may be understood from meditation on the words of God.

فَتَقَبَّلَهَا رَبُّهَا بِقَبُولٍ حَسَنٍ وَأَنْبَتَهَا نَبَاتًا حَسَنًا وَكَفَّلَهَا زَكَرِيَّا ۖ كُلَّمَا دَخَلَ عَلَيْهَا زَكَرِيَّا الْمِحْرَابَ وَجَدَ عِنْدَهَا رِزْقًا ۖ قَالَ يَا مَرْيَمُ أَنَّىٰ لَكِ هَٰذَا ۖ قَالَتْ هُوَ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ ۖ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَرْزُقُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ ﴿٣٧﴾

(3:37) ***So her Lord accepted her with a good acceptance and made her grow up a good growing, and gave her into the charge of Zachariah; whenever Zachariah entered the sanctuary to [see] her, he found with her food. He said: O Mary! whence comes this to you? She said: It is from Allah. Surely Allah gives sustenance to whom He pleases, without measure.***

al-Qubūl (acceptance), conjoined by the adjective *ḥasan* (good), gives exactly the same meaning as *al-taqabbul* (to accept willingly and gladly). Then why did God choose three words, "with good acceptance," in place of one, "gladly" or "gracefully"? It was to show that goodness of acceptance was the main theme of the talk; and also because clear mention of "good acceptance" was more ennobling and more edifying.

Mary's mother had used two sentences in her invocation: *and I have named her Mary and I commend her and her offspring to Thy protection*. The two sentences (in answer to her call) run parallel to them. It is then reasonable to believe that the first sentence, *So her Lord accepted her with a good acceptance,* is a response to her words, *and I have named*

her Mary; and the second sentence, *and made her grow up a good growing*, is the fulfilment of her second plea, *and I commend her and her offspring to Thy protection from the accursed Satan*. Obviously, accepting a good acceptance does not refer to accepting the vow of ʿImrān's wife and to giving her the reward in the next life for that good deed of hers; in other words, it was Mary who was accepted, not the vow. Mary was accepted, as she grew up to be a sincere worshipper of God and was freed to serve the sanctuary. In this light, the acceptance implies that she was chosen for this purpose by God. (We have already explained that this selection implies the chosen one's total surrender to God.)

The words, *and made her grow up a good growing*, mean that God bestowed on her and her offspring guidance and sanctity, and gave them a purified life free from the whisperings of Satan, untouched by his misleading suggestions. That is what is called "cleanliness," in the language of Islam.

These two aspects, that is, good acceptance and good growing—which ultimately mean her being chosen and purified, respectively have been referred to in a forthcoming verse: *And when the angels said: O Mary! surely Allah has chosen you above the women of the worlds* (3:42). We shall further explain this topic under that verse, God willing.

The above discourse makes it clear that it was in answer to her mother's call that Mary was chosen and purified. Likewise, the fact that she together with her son was made a sign for the nations, was a verification of the Divine words, *and the male is not like the female*.

… and gave her into the charge of Zachariah: Zachariah got her charge because his name came out in the lot that was drawn. They had disputed among themselves to get the privilege of her custody; then they agreed to decide it by a lot in which Zachariah's name was drawn. God refers to this episode when He says: … *and you were not with them when they cast their pens [to decide] which of them should have Mary in his charge, and you were not with them when they contended one with another* (3:44).

… whenever Zachariah entered the sanctuary to [see] her, he found with her food … : *al-Miḥrāb* means a place in mosque or house, reserved for worship. al-Rāghib has said:

> *Miḥrāb* (that is, niche) of the mosque: It is said that it was given this name because it is the place where one fights against Satan

> and his desires. Others say that it is because once a man enters it, it is his duty to be *al-ḥarīb* (wrested away) from worldly deeds and wandering thoughts. Some others have said that originally the foremost portion of the sitting place was called *miḥrāb* of the house; when the mosques were built, their foremost part was given the same name, *miḥrāb*. Yet others say that the word *miḥrāb* was originally used for the niche of the mosque, as it is its most important portion; then the foremost part of a house was also given this name, inasmuch as it resembles the mosque's niche; and probably this (explanation) is more correct. God has said: *They made for him what he pleased of fortresses and images …*

Some scholars have said that the word *miḥrāb* here refers to what the People of the Book call altar; and it is a closest in front of the synagogue, it has a door, to reach which one has to ascend a few steps; anyone inside remains hidden from others present in the synagogue.

Comment: In Islamic world the recess (reserved for the leader of prayers) in a mosque owes its origin to that.

Rizqan (food) in the clause, *he found with her food*, has been used as a common noun, implying that it was an unexpected and unusual food. It has been said that he used to find with her the fruits of the winter in the summer and those of the summer in the winter.

The common noun may be interpreted differently if we look at the clause in isolation. It may be said that the food was not of unusual kind, yet the word "food," is used as a common noun to show that Mary's sanctuary was never without some kind of food; whenever Zachariah went to see her, he always found some food with her. But such an interpretation does not agree with the context. Had the food been of the usual kind, Zachariah could not be satisfied by the reply that it was from God and God gives sustenance to whom He pleases without measure. Such a reply in that context would not remove the possibility that someone from the people of the synagogue visited her, either with good intention or bad.

Moreover, the words *There did Zachariah pray to his Lord …* show that Zachariah thought the presence of that sustenance to be a miraculous event which could only be attributed to God. That is why he felt irresistible urge to call on God to grant him a good offspring from Himself. It means that the sustenance was of such unusual type as to

show the honor of Mary before God.

The sentence, *He said: O Mary! whence comes this …*, also proves it. This sentence comes after the words, *he found with her food*; yet the two sentences are not joined by any conjunctive. It means that he did not ask the question more than once. When she gave the reply and he was convinced of her prestige in the eyes of God, he felt it was the time to pray to God to grant him too an unusual prayer and give him a good offspring in his old age.

هُنَالِكَ دَعَا زَكَرِيَّا رَبَّهُ ۖ قَالَ رَبِّ هَبْ لِي مِنْ لَدُنْكَ ذُرِّيَّةً طَيِّبَةً ۖ إِنَّكَ سَمِيعُ الدُّعَاءِ ﴿٣٨﴾

(3:38) ***There did Zachariah pray to his Lord; he said: My Lord! grant me from Thee good offspring; surely Thou art the Hearer of prayer.***

A thing is good (*al-ṭayyib*), if it is suitable for the purpose it is required for. A good land is suitable for its inhabitants in its water, atmosphere, climate and other necessities of life. God says: *And as for the good land, its vegetation springs forth [abundantly] by the permission of its Lord* (7:58). A good life is the one whose various aspects are in harmony with each other and give satisfaction to the man concerned. By the same reason, a good perfume is called *al-ṭīb*. Accordingly, a good offspring would mean a child who, in his attributes, qualities and activities, would fulfil the hopes, and satisfy the ambitions of his father. Zachariah prayed to God: *My Lord! grant me from Thee good offspring*. It happened when he saw the grace of God on Mary and found out how great her prestige was before the Lord. He was so overwhelmed by that experience that he could not refrain from praying to God to bestow on him too a similar bounty. Implied in the adjective "good" was a plea that the said offspring should possess a personality much like that of Mary, and should be granted a similar prestige and honor before God. He was then and there granted all that he had asked for. God gave him a son, John—the prophet most similar to Jesus (peace be on both); he was given all the qualities of perfection and excellence which Jesus and his Truthful mother, Mary, were granted. It was for this reason that God named him John, and sent him to verify a Word from God, and made him honorable and chaste as well as a prophet, from among the good ones. As will be explained later, it was the nearest that

any man could resemble Mary and her son Jesus, peace be on them all.

فَنَادَتْهُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ وَهُوَ قَائِمٌ يُصَلِّي فِي الْمِحْرَابِ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يُبَشِّرُكَ بِيَحْيَىٰ مُصَدِّقًا بِكَلِمَةٍ مِنَ اللَّهِ وَسَيِّدًا وَحَصُورًا وَنَبِيًّا مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿٣٩﴾

(3:39) ***Then the angels called to him as he stood praying in the sanctuary: That Allah gives you the good news of John verifying a word from Allah, and honorable and chaste and a prophet, from among the good ones.***

The third and second person pronouns refer to Zachariah. *al-Bushrā*, *al-ibshār* and *al-tabshīr*, all have the same meaning: To give good news, to bring good tidings of what would make the recipient happy.

Allah gives you the good news of John: It shows that it was God who gave him the name, John; some verses in Chapter 19 also indicate the same: *O Zachariah! surely We give you good news of a boy whose name shall be John* (19:7).

The name, John, and its bestowal from God at the very beginning of the good tidings (before his birth and even conception), support what we have said above, that Zachariah had asked his Lord to give him a child with a prestige in Divine presence similar to that enjoyed by Mary. She and her son, Jesus (peace be on them), were jointly a sign of God, as He says: *and We made her and her son a sign for the nations* (21:91).

God therefore gave John, to the utmost possible extent, all the qualities and attributes given to Mary and Jesus. The attributes of Mary had fully blossomed in Jesus; and John was made to resemble Jesus as completely and perfectly as was possible. Yet Jesus had precedence of John, because his creation and birth was firmly decreed long before the prayer of Zachariah for John was accepted. That is why Jesus was given superiority over John, and made an *ūlū al-ʿazm* messenger, bringing a new shariah and a new Book. Apart from such necessary dissimilarities, John and Jesus resembled each other to the maximum possible extent.

For a glimpse of this similarity, look at the stories of John and Jesus as narrated in Chapter 19 (Mary)[1].

About John: *O Zachariah! surely We give you good news of a boy whose name shall be John: We have not made before anyone his namesake*

1 See also Eng. vol. 27. (Ed.)

… O John! take hold of the Book with strength; and We granted him wisdom while yet a child, and tenderness from Us and purity, and he was one who guarded [against evil], and dutiful to his parents, and he was not insolent, disobedient. And peace on him on the day he was born, and on the day he dies, and on the day he is raised to life (19:7, 12-15).

Now, compare it with what has immediately been said about Jesus: *So she took a curtain [to screen herself] from them; then We sent to her Our spirit, and there appeared to her a well made man … He said: I am only a messenger of your Lord: That I give you a pure boy … He said: Even so; your Lord says: It is easy to Me and that We may make him a sign to men and a mercy from Us; … But she pointed to him. They said: How should we speak to one who is a child in the cradle? He said: Surely I am a servant of Allah; He has given me the Book and made me a prophet; and He has made me blessed wherever I may be, and He has enjoined on me prayer and zakāt as long as I live; and dutiful to my mother, and He has not made me insolent, unblessed; and peace on me on the day I was born, and on the day I die, and on the day I am raised to life* (19:17-21, 29-33).

The verses of this chapter too point to this similarity of the two prophets.

God named him John[1]; and the son of Mary was called Jesus which reportedly means *yaʿīsh* (he lives)[2]; John was sent to verify a Word from God, that is, Jesus, as God says: … *a Word from Him whose name is the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary* (3:45); John too, just like Jesus, was given wisdom and taught the Book while yet a child; he too is praised, like Jesus, to be a tenderness from God and purity, and to be dutiful to his parents, not insolent or disobedient; also much like Jesus peace was sent to him on three junctures of his existence. Also, God made John honorable as Jesus was made worthy of regard; and he was made chaste and a prophet, from among the good ones, as Jesus was. All this was in

1 John means "He lives." (Trans.)

2 Jesus: In Hebrew it is Yèshūaʿ; it is a later form, by vowel dissimilation, of Yòshūaʿ (*Yūshaʿ* in Arabic, and Joshua in Latin), which in its turn was a contracted form of Yehòshūaʿ. Its meaning: Yahwah, that is God, is salvation, or Yahwah saves. See *Dictionary of Proper Names and Places in the Bible,* published by Robert Hale, London, 1982; *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible,* published by McGraw-Hill Book Co. Inc., 1963. (Trans.)

answer to the prayer of Zachariah, when he asked for a good offspring, to be his heir, and with whom God would be well pleased. As explained earlier, he had prayed to God to this effect when he was overwhelmed by what he saw of the distinction and excellence of Mary before God.

… verifying a Word from Allah: It shows that he was a harbinger of Jesus; "Word" in this context refers to Jesus, as the verse 3:45 (quoted above) says that Mary was given good news of a Word from God.

… and honorable and chaste: *al-Sayyid* (chief, head of community); the one who manages the people's affairs related to their lives and livelihood or concerning a socially accepted virtue; subsequently, it was used with increasing frequency, for honorable and noble, inasmuch as the above-mentioned management of affairs entails honor and excellence—emanating from his authority, wealth or other such virtues.

al-Ḥuṣūr (chaste, one who abstains from women). In the present context it signifies a man who totally abstains from women because he forsakes all the worldly desires and leads a life of asceticism and self-denial.

قَالَ رَبِّ أَنَّىٰ يَكُونُ لِي غُلَامٌ وَقَدْ بَلَغَنِيَ الْكِبَرُ وَامْرَأَتِي عَاقِرٌ ۖ قَالَ كَذَٰلِكَ اللَّهُ يَفْعَلُ مَا يَشَاءُ ﴿٤٠﴾

(3:40) ***He said: My Lord! How shall there be a son [born] to me, and old age has already come upon me, and my wife is barren? He said: Even thus does Allah what He pleases.***

The question is a mirror of the awe and the wonder which overwhelmed Zachariah when he heard the good news; he wanted to ascertain how and when this promise would be fulfilled. In no way does this question imply that he thought it unlikely to happen, or too great a boon to come his way. How could he harbour any doubt about it when he was clearly told that God would give him the son he had asked for? Moreover, he had already mentioned these two factors (which are the basis of this question) in his invocation, as God quotes him as saying: *My Lord! surely my bones are weakened and my head flares with hoariness, and, my Lord! never have I been unsuccessful in my prayer to Thee: and surely I fear my relatives after me; and my wife is barren; therefore grant me from Thyself an heir …* (19:4-5).

Furthermore, the question reflects on an interesting psychological

nay, spiritual—ecstasy experienced by Zachariah. No sooner did he look at Mary and the grace of God she enjoyed than he was transported to the plane of ecstasy and felt himself overwhelmed by Divine Mercy and love; while in that state, he asked from his Lord for a good child, and mentioned in that prayer the basic factors—his own old age and his wife's barrenness—which had contributed to that sorrowful and pitiable condition. When his prayer was granted and he was given the good news of a son, it was as though he woke up from that trance; then he began expressing his joyful astonishment on such a marvelous phenomenon—Oh! Would I beget a son, in spite of my old age, even though my wife is barren! The same factors which in the past had caused him sorrow and distress, now enhanced his happiness and joy.

We may also look at this episode in the following light. Zachariah was assured that his prayer had been accepted; thereupon he started mentioning one snag after the other. Actually, he wanted to ascertain as to how each hindrance would be overcome, how each snag would be removed. He liked to know all the particulars concerning that Divine Grace, in order that his enjoyment would be complete and his happiness perfect. We find the same emotions shown by Abraham when he was given a similar good tidings: *And inform them of the guests of Abraham: When they entered upon him, they said, Peace. He said: Surely we are afraid of you. They said: Be not afraid, surely we give you the good news of a boy possessing knowledge. He said: Do you give me good news [of a so] when old age has come upon me? Of what then do you give me good news! They said: We give you good news with truth; therefore be not of the despairing. He said: And who despairs of the mercy of his Lord but the erring ones?* (15:51-56) When the angels told him not to despair, he made it clear that his question had not emanated from any despair; how could it be so, when despairing from the mercy of God was an error, a straying, and he was not an erring or straying servant? The angels must surely know that when a master turns with mercy to a slave in a way as to bring the slave nearer to himself, to raise him in rank, and exalt him in prestige, the slave feels so exhilarated, so overjoyed, that he yearns to hear those words over and over again, repeatedly going into all its details, joyously looking at all its aspects!

One may easily see the good manners of the purified servants of God, if one reflects on the words, *and old age has already come upon*

me. What Zachariah alluded to was the fact that he had become too old to have ability, or even desire, to perform sexual act; as for his wife, she suffered from double impediment: Old age and barrenness. The clause, *my wife is barren*, is expressed, in 19:8, in a way as to mean, my wife had been barren. It signifies that she had not become unable to bear children because of the advanced age; that she was barren from the very beginning.

He said: Even so; Allah does what He pleases: The actual replier is God—either directly or through the agency of the angels who had called to Zachariah. But apparently the pronoun in *He said* refers to the angel; he was the one who said, although the saying is attributable to God as it was conveyed to Zachariah by His command. This interpretation is supported by the verse: *He [the Spirit] said: So shall it be; your Lord says: It is easy to Me, and indeed I created you before, when you were nothing* (19:9).

The above discourse shows that:

First: Zachariah heard that voice from the same place whence he used to hear the angel's voice before.

Second: *Even so* is predicate of a deleted subject; the completed subject would be something like this: The matter is even so. It emphasizes that the Divine Grace, of which he was given the good news, was certain to appear; it was a firmly decreed matter which would surely take place. This reply is similar to the one given by the spirit to Mary: *He said: Even so; your Lord says: It is easy to Me; … and it is a matter which has been decreed* (19:21).

Third: *Allah does what He pleases*, is a separate sentence, explaining the reason of the preceding "Even so."

قَالَ رَبِّ اجْعَلْ لِي آيَةً ۖ قَالَ آيَتُكَ أَلَّا تُكَلِّمَ النَّاسَ ثَلَاثَةَ أَيَّامٍ إِلَّا رَمْزًا ۗ وَاذْكُرْ
رَبَّكَ كَثِيرًا وَسَبِّحْ بِالْعَشِيِّ وَالْإِبْكَارِ ﴿٤١﴾

(3:41) ***He said: My Lord! appoint a sign for me. Said He: Your sign is that you would not speak to men for three days except by signs; and remember your Lord much and glorify Him in the evening and the morning:***

It is written in *Majmaʿ al-bayān:*

> *al-Ramz* is to make signs with the lips; sometimes it is used for gesturing with eyebrows, eyes and/or hands; but mostly it is used in the first meaning."

al-ʿAshiyy (evening) indicates the end portion of the day; probably it is derived from *al-ʿashwah* (dim-sightedness); the evening time was given this name because it merges into the darkness of the night and thus affects the eyesight. *al-Ibkār* (early morning) originally it meant to make haste, to come early.

The verse throws light on yet another similarity between John and Jesus. Compare it with the advice which Jesus gave to his mother soon after his birth: *Then if you see any man, say: Surely I have vowed a fast to the Beneficent Allah, so I shall not speak to any man today.* (19:26)

Zachariah asked his Lord to appoint a sign for him. Sign is a symbol that points to another thing or idea. There is a difference of opinion regarding the purpose behind this prayer: Did he want to ascertain, with the help of the sign, that the good news was really from God; that it was an angelic (or a Divine) speech, and not a satanic voice? Or, was it to know the time when his wife would be pregnant, so that he might be sure of the conception?

The context and the framework of the story does not agree very much with the second view. Yet the exegetes are reluctant to accept the first interpretation. They are not inclined to say that Zachariah wanted to be sure of the Divine Origin of that message. The prophets were sinless and protected from errors and mistakes; as such they knew perfectly well the difference between the angelic inspiration and the satanic whispering; the Satan could not interfere in their affairs, nor could he confuse them in a way as to cast doubt about the Divine revelation sent to them.

This observation is correct as far as it goes. But it should be remembered that they knew that difference not by themselves, but because God had given them that knowledge. If so, then what objection can be raised if Zachariah prayed to God to appoint for him a sign to help him ascertain the Divine Origin of that news? Of course, this objection could be entertained had his prayer been rejected—had God refused to appoint for him a sign as he had asked for.

The appointed sign itself—not being able to talk to the people for three days—supports (nay, proves) the first view. Utmost that the Satan can do against the prophets is to touch them with some ailments in their bodies; to put hindrance in their mission; to sabotage their efforts; to mislead the people away from the prophetic path; and to encourage

and strengthen their enemies. God says: *And remember Our servant Job, when he called upon his Lord: The Satan has afflicted me with toil and torment* (38:41); *And We did not send before you any apostle or prophet, but when he desired, the Satan made a suggestion respecting his desire; but Allah annuls that which the Satan casts, then does Allah establish His communications …* (22:52); *… then I forgot the fish, and nothing made me forget to speak of it but the Satan …* (18:63). Such touches and afflictions do not go beyond annoying or discomforting the prophet concerned. But the Satan can never get any power over the person of the prophets themselves; they are protected from it. (In previous discussions we have proven the *ʿiṣmah* of the prophets.) Now we come to the present subject matter. It was the sign appointed by God for Zachariah that he would not speak to the people for three days; he would remain tongue-tied for all kinds of speeches except for the remembrance of God and His glorification. *Said He: Your sign is that you would not speak to men for three days except by signs; and remember your Lord much and glorify Him in the evening and the morning.* It was a sign that affected Zachariah's person itself and made him tongue-tied. It was such an effect as was absolutely beyond the power of the Satan, because Zachariah was protected by Divine *ʿiṣmah*. This was, therefore, a sure sign that it was affected by God, and not by the Satan. And such a sign is more in accord with the first view than the second.

Question: It will be difficult, if we take the first view, to explain the verse, *He said: My Lord! how shall there be a son [born] to me, and old age has already come upon me, and my wife is barren? He said: Even so; God does what He pleases*. This verse clearly says that he spoke to his Lord and asked Him what he wanted to ask, and got an answer to his enquiry. Now, if he harboured any doubt concerning the genuineness of the voice, then why all this dialogue? And if he had no doubt, then why this demand to be given a sign?

Reply: Certainty and belief have many grades, varying in the degrees of intensity. Possibly, Zachariah was sure from the very beginning that it was an angelic voice by the command of the Beneficent God; then he asked his Lord concerning the details of the birth of his promised son, because it was a truly awe-inspiring phenomenon, and again he heard the angel's voice answering his question and was again sure of its genuineness; then he prayed to his Lord to appoint for him

a sign in order that his certainty—that it was a Divine communication—should reach the degree of tranquillity.

The clause, *Then the angels called to him*, supports this interpretation. *al-Nidāʾ* means to call from a distance. That is why it is generally used for a shout, a loud utterance—we cannot speak from a distance except in a loud voice—although loudness is not a part of its meaning. For example, God refers to the prayer of Zachariah in these words: *When called he* (nādā) *unto his Lord in a low voice* (nidāʾan khafiyyan) (19:3). His prayer was termed as a call from a distance—the distance being the spiritual one between Zachariah's humility and modesty and the Divine sublimity, might and grandeur; otherwise, it could not be described as "a low voice." Anyhow, *the angels called to him* may be taken to mean that Zachariah had only heard the voices of the angels without setting his eyes on them. (And therefore he decided to ask for a sign.)

An exegete has written:

> That God gave him a sign of not speaking, means that God forbade him to speak to the people for three days; he was to remain silent and spend the stipulated time in remembrance and glorification of God; it does not mean that he became tongue-tied and could not speak to the people at all … The fact is that Zachariah, being a human being, wanted to know the exact time when the conception would take place, in order that he himself might feel tranquility and could also inform his wife of the great event. That is why he asked what he asked. When his question was answered, he called upon God to prescribe for him a special prayer (in order that he might hasten to show his gratitude to God), which would terminate in fulfilment of his hope. In other words, the end of that period of thanksgiving would indicate that the time of conception had arrived. Thereupon, God told him not to speak to the people for three days, devoting all that time in remembrance and glorification of God; if there arose a need to talk with someone, he was to communicate with him in signs only. When the appointed three days passed, it would be the time to convey the good news to his wife.

Comment: Clearly, no trace of this imaginary narrative can be found in the verses. The Qur'an has nowhere mentioned—either

directly or indirectly—any such story. The said writer has given free rein to his fancy when he says that Zachariah asked for a special regimen of worship in order to offer his thanks to God, that the end of that worship period was to lead to the conception, that the termination of that time was a sign for the beginning of the pregnancy, that the words, "you would not speak to men," were an order to him not to speak, and that he wanted to convey, at the end of the stipulated time the good news to his wife.

Angelic Inspiration and Satanic Whispering: The Speech of God

We have repeatedly mentioned that when a word is made for a meaning, it actually looks at the main purpose behind that meaning. The words, "talk" and "speech," refer to voice, because voice conveys the idea of the speaker to the hearer. Therefore, whatever conveys that idea may be called a talk or speech. It may be a voice or a combination of several voices; in fact, it may not have any sound at all, as for example, is the case with sign language and symbols. If a siren conveys a complete idea, it may be called a speech, even though it is not uttered by mouth. Likewise, people use the word, "speech," for signs and symbols although no sound is involved in them.

It is for this reason that the Qur'an uses the words, "speech" and "talk," for the ideas created in man's mind by the Satan. God narrates the claim of the Satan: *And most certainly I will … bid them so that they shall slit the ears of the cattle, and most certainly I will bid them so that they shall alter Allah's creation …* (4:119)

Also, He says:

Like the Satan when he says to man: Disbelieve, but when he disbelieves, he says: I am surely clear of you … (59:16); *… the slinking [Satan] who whispers into the hearts of men …* (114:5); *… the satans from among men and jinn, some of them suggesting to others varnished falsehood to deceive [them] …* (6:112); *And the Satan shall say …: Surely Allah promised you the promise of truth, and I gave you promises then failed to keep them to you …* (14:22); *Satan threatens you with poverty and enjoins you to abomination, and Allah promises you forgiveness from Himself and abundance; and Allah is Ample-giving, All-knowing. He grants wisdom to whom He pleases, and whoever is granted wisdom, he indeed is given a great good* (2:268-269.)

Clearly, these misleading ideas, coming into a man's mind, have been ascribed to the Satan, and have been called his bid, order, talk, whispering, suggestion, promise and threat; all these are various modes of speech and talk, although the Satan does not utter them by mouth, nor does the man hear them by his ears.

The last quoted verse mentions the promise of God—for forgiveness and abundance—face to face with the satanic threat. It implies that this promise stands for an angelic inspiration in contrast to the satanic whispering. And that inspiration has been termed as "wisdom." Also there are other verses pointing to this reality in various terms. For example: … *and [He will] make for you a light with which you will walk* … (57:28); He it is Who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers that they might have more of faith added to their faith—and God's are the hosts of the heaven and the earth … (48:4);[1] *Therefore [for] whomsoever Allah intends that He would guide him aright, He expands his breast for Islam; and [for] whomsoever He intends that He should leave him to err, He makes his breast strait and narrow as though he were ascending into the sky; thus does Allah lay uncleanliness on those who do not believe* (6:125).

It should be noted here that the satanic whispering has been called "the uncleanliness of the Satan" in the verse 8:11.

The above discourse makes it clear that the Satan and the angels "speak" to man by putting ideas into his mind.

Then there is a speaking reserved for God, as He says: *And there is not for any man that Allah should speak to him except by revelation, or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger so that he reveals by His permission what He pleases* (42:51). Apart from sending a messenger, that is, an angel (with which we are not concerned here), God speaks to man in two ways: (i) Revelation, in which there is no veil between God and the person spoken to; (ii) Speaking from behind a veil or curtain.

These are, in short, various kinds of angelic inspiration and satanic whispering; and various modes of God's speech.

As for the Divine Speech which is called revelation, it needs no extraneous factor for its recognition, no other distinguishing element

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1 We have explained this verse while writing about *al-sakīnah* (tranquillity) under the verse: … *in which there is tranquillity from your lord* (2:248). (Auth.)

to ascertain its authenticity. It is a direct speech, without any curtain between God and the recipient of the revelation; and it is just impossible for any doubt to creep up into such a talk. But other kinds of Divine Speech need some supporting evidence, which in its turn relies on the direct revelation.

As for a distinction between the angelic and the satanic talks, the signs mentioned in the above quoted verses are enough to separate one from the other. The angelic inspiration accompanies expanding of breast, calls to Divine forgiveness and abundance, and encourages man to follow the religion of God as expounded in the Divine Book and the prophetic sunnah. The satanic whispering, on the other hand, causes the breast to be strait and narrow, tempts one to follow one's desire, threatens with poverty, enjoins abomination, and finally pushes one to act in a manner opposed to the Book of God and the sunnah, and contrary to the demands of the healthy nature.

The prophets and their close followers sometimes saw and recognized the angels and the Satan, as God describes in the stories of Adam, Abraham, and Lot (peace be on them). Obviously, in such cases, there was no need for any extraneous identifying factor. But in other cases when they did not see the angel (or the Satan), they, like other believers, needed some identification to ascertain that the speaker was in fact from God—and that identification ultimately depended on the direct revelation from God.

Examining Narrations

(1) al-Ṣādiq said about the words of God, *When the woman of ʿImrān said…*: "Verily God revealed to ʿImrān: 'I am going to give you a male (child), of sound health and blessed, who shall heal the blind and the leper and raise the dead (to life) by the permission of God; and I'll appoint him an apostle to the children of Israel.' ʿImrān informed his wife, Ḥannah, of it—and she is the mother of Mary. When Ḥannah conceived, she thought that she was carrying the same male child. But when she brought it forth, she said: *My Lord! surely I have brought it forth a female, and the male is not like the female.* (She said it because) a female cannot be an apostle. God says: *And Allah knew what she brought forth.* Thereafter, when God gave Jesus to Mary, (it was understood that) the good

news and promise (which God had given to ʿImrān) were in fact about that (grandson). Therefore, you should not think it strange if we say something about one of us (Ahl al-Bayt) and it appears (not in him, but) in his child or grandchild." (*Tafsīr al-Qummī*)

Author's comment: A nearly similar tradition has been narrated from the same Imam in *al-Kāfī*, and from al-Bāqir in *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*.

(2) al-Ṣādiq said about the same verse: "A released child lived in the synagogue (and) did not go out. So, when (the wife of ʿImrān) delivered her, she said: *'My Lord! surely I have brought it forth a female, and the male is not like the female.'* The female has her menstruation, and (therefore she) will (have to) go out of the place of worship, while a released child does not go out of the place of worship." (al-ʿAyyāshī)

(3) al-Bāqir or al-Ṣādiq said: "She had vowed what was in her womb to the synagogue for serving the worshippers; and the male is not like the female in service." Then the Imam said: "Then she grew up; and she served them and looked after them, until she attained maturity. Then Zachariah told her to hide herself behind a screen (away) from the (other) worshippers." (*ibid.*)

Author's comment: As you see, the traditions support what we said in the Commentary. But evidently they take the clause, "and the male is not like the female," to be a part of the speech of ʿImrān's wife, not a comment from God. In that case, it will be necessary to explain why "the male" was mentioned before "the female," against the norms of grammar and eloquence; also, it will be essential to find out a reason as to why she gave her daughter the name she gave, that is, Mary (Released; devoted)—unless it can be shown that there was no correlation between releasing her and making her an attendant of the synagogue.

The first tradition shows that ʿImrān was a prophet who received revelations from God. It is also proved by another tradition narrated by Abū Baṣīr in which he says: "I asked Abū Jaʿfar whether ʿImrān was a prophet. He said: 'Yes, he was a prophet sent (to his people) …' " (*Biḥār al-anwār*)

That tradition also shows that the wife of ʿImrān was called Ḥannah, as is generally believed. Some other traditions say that her name was Marthār (Martha?). However, it is not an important subject for us to

labor on.

The same tradition (quoted from al-Qummī) goes on to say:

> "When Mary reached the age of puberty, she entered the sanctuary and put a curtain (on the entrance) to hide herself; and no one entered therein. And Zachariah used to enter the sanctuary; and he used to find with her the fruits of summer in the winter and the fruits of winter in the summer; he used to say: *Whence comes this to you?* And she used to reply: *It is from Allah. Surely Allah gives sustenance to whom He pleases without measure.*"

(4) al-Ṣādiq said: "When Zachariah prayed to his Lord to give him a child and the angels called to him as they did, he desired to ascertain that the said voice was (really) from God. Thereupon God revealed to him that it was the sign (of its Divine Origin) that he would remain tongue-tied for three days. When he became tongue-tied and could not speak, he understood that no one, other than God, could do that. And it is the (meaning of the) word of God: *He said: My Lord! Appoint a sign for me.*" (al-ʿAyyāshī)

Author's comment: A nearly similar tradition has been narrated by al-Qummī in his *al-Tafsīr.* It has been made clear in the Commentary that this theme does not go against the context of the verse.

An exegete has very strongly objected to many of the themes expounded in these traditions; for example, sending the revelation to ʿImrān, presence of the off-season fruits in Mary's sanctuary, request of Zachariah for a sign in order that he could ascertain the authenticity of the voice etc. He has said: These are the things which cannot be proved. Neither God has mentioned them nor the Prophet has described them; nor can they be proved by reason or any reliable history. There are only some Israelite (and some non-Israelite) legends. Why should the Muslims go out of their way to explain the Qur'an in terms of those unverified legends, which are anyhow too far-fetched to be acceptable?

Comment: The said exegete has made claims without offering any argument in his support. Of course, these traditions are *āḥād,* and some are even weak in their chains; also it is not incumbent, for a scholar to accept them or to use them as an argument. Yet, when we ponder on the verses of the Qur'an, we find ourselves ready to accept those traditions (because they are consistent with the Qur'an). It is all the more correct for the traditions narrated from the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt, as

they do not contain any theme unacceptable to the reason.

Of course, one has to be on guard against some untenable things attributed to some early exegetes. For example, Qatādah and ʿIkrimah are reported to have said:

> "The Satan came to Zachariah and created a doubt (in his mind) whether the good news was really from God. He said (to Zachariah): 'Had it been from God, He would have talked to you in a low voice as you had called unto Him in a low voice.' "

There are many such baseless things which cannot be accepted at all. Another such example may be seen in the Gospel according to Luke, where it says:

> And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, … And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season. (Luke, 1:19-20).

Other Traditions about "The One Spoken To"

(1) al-Ṣādiq said: "There is no heart but it has two ears, on one of them is a guiding angel, and on the other a tempting Satan; this orders him and that restrains him the Satan enjoins him to (commit) sins, and the angel holds him back from it. And this is the word of God, the Mighty, the Great: … *sitting on the right and on the left. He utters not a word but there is by him a watcher at hand* (50:17-18)." (*al-Kāfī*)

Author's comment: There are many traditions of the same meaning, some of which will be quoted later on. In this tradition, Imam has applied the verse to an angel and a Satan, while other traditions apply it to the two angels who write down the good and evil deeds of a man. But the two sets of traditions are not mutually exclusive. The verse only says that there are "watchers" with every man who receive (that is, note down) all his utterances, and that there are two of them, one on his right side and the other on his left. But the verse does not say whether those watchers are from only the angels or from the angels and the *satans*. As it is silent on this point, it may be applied to either explanation.

(2) Zurārah said: "I asked Abū ʿAbdillāh about the apostle, the prophet and *al-muḥaddath* (the one spoken to). He said: 'The

messenger is the one who sees the angel (who) brings the message of his Lord to him, and tells him: "(God) orders you so-and-so." And the messenger is a prophet with (the added rank of) apostleship. And the prophet does not see the angel; something comes down to him—the news (comes) to his heart; and he becomes as though he be in a trance, and he sees (the vision) in his dream.' I said: 'Then how does he know that what was (shown to him) in his dream was truth?' He said: 'God makes it clear to him, so that he knows that it is truth; and he does not see the angel …' " (*ibid.*)

Author's comment: [The Imam's statement:] "The Messenger is a prophet …" It shows that the two ranks may be combined together in one person. We have explained in detail the meaning of apostleship and prophethood in the Commentary of the verse 2:213, *Mankind was but one people …*

"He becomes as though he be in a trance": It explains the next sentence, "and he sees (the vision) in his dream." It clarifies that what is meant by "dream" is not the dream as known to us; it only refers to a condition in which the prophet becomes oblivious of his surroundings.

"God makes it clear to him": God makes the truth known to the prophet, enabling him to differentiate between an angelic inspiration and a satanic whispering.

(3) Burayd enquired from al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq (peace be on both of them), *inter alia,* in a tradition: "Then what are the apostle, the prophet and the one spoken to?" (The Imam) said: "The apostle is the one that the angel appears before him and talks to him; and the prophet sees (the vision) in the dream; and sometimes apostleship and prophethood are combined in one (person); and *al-muḥaddath* (the one spoken to) is the one who hears the voice but does not see the form." Burayd said: "I said: 'May God make your affairs good! How can the prophet know that what he saw in (his) dream was truth and that it was from the angel?' (The Imam) said: 'He is helped (by God) in it until he knows it. Certainly God ended (the series of divine) books with your Book, and the prophets with your Prophet …' " (*Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*)

Author's comment: It has the same connotation as the preceding tradition. The Imam has sufficiently explained the meaning of "the one

spoken to"—it is the one who hears the voice of an unseen speaker who speaks by order of God. The words, "Certainly God ended the (series of divine) books …," point to this reality.

When writing on the following verses[1], we shall discuss in detail about "the one spoken to."

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The end. All praise be to Almighty God.

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1 See Eng. vol. 6 (Ed.)